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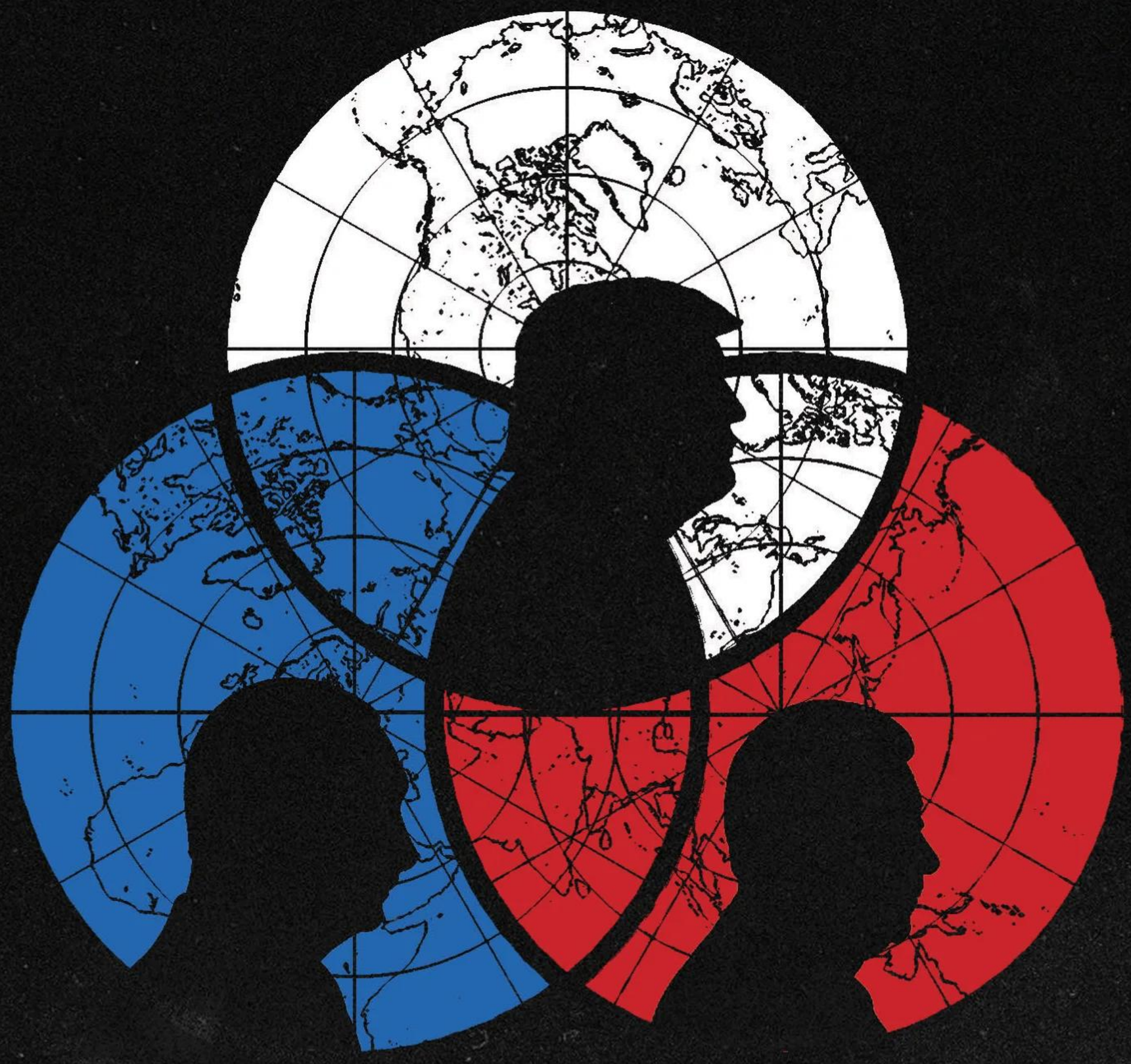

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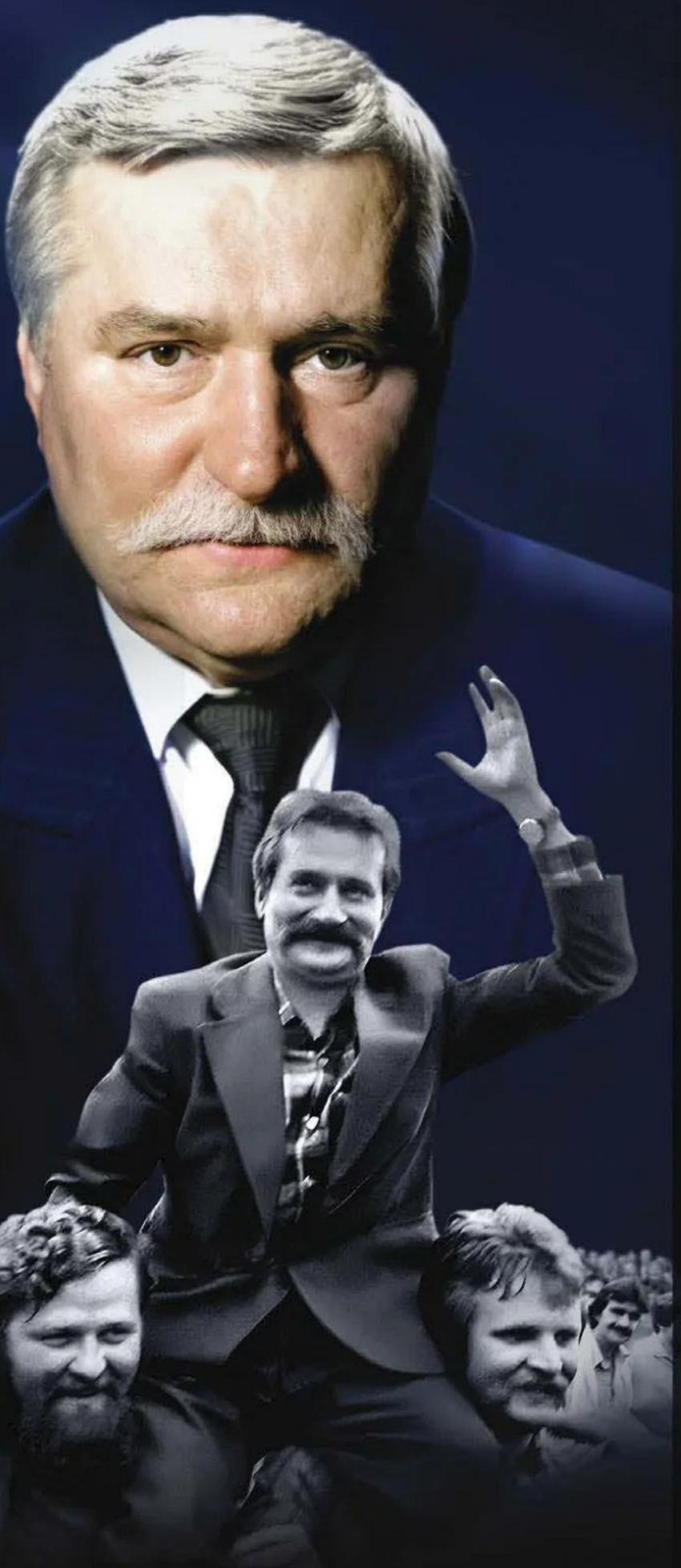

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The Rise and Fall of Great-Power Competition

Trump's New Spheres of Influence

STACIE E. GODDARD

"After being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition returned." So declared the National Security Strategy that President Donald Trump released in 2017, capturing in a single line the story that American foreign policymakers have spent the last decade telling themselves and the world. In the post–Cold War era, the United States generally sought to cooperate with other powers whenever possible and embed them in an American-led global order. But in the mid-2010s, a new consensus took hold. The era of cooperation was over, and U.S. strategy had to focus on Washington's contests with its major rivals, China and Russia. The main priority of American foreign policy was clear: stay ahead of them.

Washington's rivals "are contesting our geopolitical advantages and trying to change the international order in their favor," Trump's 2017 document explained. As a result, his National Defense Strategy argued

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Illustration by Ed Johnson

the following year, interstate strategic competition had become "the primary concern in U.S. national security." When Trump's bitter rival Joe Biden took office as president in 2021, some aspects of U.S. foreign policy changed dramatically. But great-power competition remained the leitmotif. In 2022, Biden's National Security Strategy warned that "the most pressing strategic challenge facing our vision is from powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy." The only answer, it argued, was to "out-compete" China and constrain an aggressive Russia.

Trump may be breaking with recent convention, but he is tapping into a deep tradition.

Some hailed this consensus on great-power competition; others lamented it. But as Russia amped up its aggression in Ukraine, China made clear its designs on Taiwan, and the two autocratic powers deepened their ties and collaborated more closely with other U.S. rivals, few predicted that Washington would abandon competition as its guiding light. As Trump returned to the White House in 2025, many analysts expected continuity: a "Trump-Biden-Trump foreign policy," as the title of an essay in *Foreign Affairs* described it.

Then came the first two months of Trump's second term. With astonishing speed, Trump has shattered the consensus he helped create. Rather than compete with China and Russia, Trump now wants to work with them, seeking deals that, during his first term, would have seemed antithetical to U.S. interests. Trump has made clear that he supports a swift end to the war in Ukraine, even if it requires publicly humiliating the Ukrainians while embracing Russia and allowing it to claim vast swaths of Ukraine.

Relations remain more tense with China, especially as Trump's tariffs come into effect and the threat of Chinese retaliation looms. But Trump has signaled that he seeks a wide-ranging settlement with Chinese President Xi Jinping. Anonymous Trump advisers told *The New York Times* that Trump would like to sit down "man to man" with Xi to hammer out terms governing trade, investment, and nuclear arms. All the while, Trump has ramped up economic pressure on U.S. allies in Europe and on Canada (which he hopes to coerce into becoming "the 51st state") and has threatened to seize Greenland and the Panama Canal. Almost overnight, the United States went from competing with its aggressive adversaries to bullying its mild-mannered allies.

Some observers, trying to make sense of Trump's behavior, have tried to put his policies firmly back in the box of great-power competition. In this view, moving closer to Russian President Vladimir Putin is great-power politics at its finest—even a "reverse Kissinger," designed to split apart the Chinese-Russian partnership. Others have suggested that Trump is simply pursuing a more nationalistic style of great-power competition, one that would make sense to Xi and Putin, as well as India's Narendra Modi and Hungary's Viktor Orban.

These interpretations might have been persuasive in January. But it should now be clear that Trump's vision of the world is not one of great-power competition but of great-power collusion: a "concert" system akin to the one that shaped Europe during the nineteenth century. What Trump wants is a world managed by strongmen who work together—not always harmoniously but always purposefully—to impose a shared vision of order on the rest of the world. This does not mean that the United States will stop competing with China and Russia altogether: great-power competition as a feature of international politics is enduring and undeniable. But great-power competition as the organizing principle for American foreign policy has proved remarkably shallow and short-lived. And yet if history sheds any light on Trump's new approach, it is that things may end badly.

WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

Although competing with major rivals was central to Trump's first term and Biden's term, it's important to note that "great-power competition" never described a coherent strategy. To have a strategy suggests that leaders have defined concrete ends or metrics of success. During the Cold War, for example, Washington sought to increase its power in order to contain Soviet expansion and influence. In the contemporary era, by contrast, the struggle for power has often seemed like an end in itself. Although Washington identified its rivals, it rarely specified when, how, and for what reason competition was taking place. As a result, the concept was exceedingly elastic. "Great-power competition" could explain Trump's threats to abandon NATO unless European countries increased defense spending, since doing so could protect American security interests from free-riding. But the term could also apply to Biden's reinvestment in NATO, which sought to revitalize an alliance of democracies against Russian and Chinese influence.

Rather than defining a specific strategy, great-power competition represented a potent narrative of world politics, one that provides essential insight into how U.S. policymakers saw themselves and the world around them, and how they wanted others to perceive them. In this story, the main character was the United States. Sometimes, the country was cast as a strong and imposing hero, with unparalleled economic vitality and military might. But Washington could also be presented as a victim, as in Trump's 2017 strategy document, which portrayed the United States operating in a "dangerous world" with rival powers "aggressively undermining American interests around the globe." At times, there was a supporting cast: for example, a community of democracies that, in Biden's view, was a necessary partner in ensuring global economic prosperity and the protection of human rights.

China and Russia, in turn, served as the primary antagonists. Although there were cameos by other foils—Iran, North Korea, and an array of nonstate actors—Beijing and Moscow stood out as the perpetrators of a plot to weaken the United States. Here again, some of the details varied depending on who was telling the story. For Trump, the tale was grounded in national interests: these revisionist powers sought to "erode American security and prosperity." Under Biden, the focus shifted from interests to ideals, from security to order. Washington had to compete with the major autocratic powers to ensure the safety of democracy and the resilience of the rules-based international order.

But for nearly a decade, the broad narrative arc remained the same: aggressive antagonists were seeking to harm American interests, and Washington had to respond. Once this vision of the world was in place, it imbued events with particular meanings. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was an attack not just on Ukraine but also on the U.S.-led order. China's military buildup in the South China Sea represented not a defense of Beijing's core interests but an attempt to expand Beijing's influence in the Indo-Pacific at Washington's expense. Great-power competition meant that technology could not be neutral and that the United States needed to push China out of Europe's 5G networks and limit Beijing's access to semiconductors. Foreign aid and infrastructure projects in African countries were not simply instruments of development but weapons in the battle for primacy. The World Health Organization, the World Trade Organization, the International Criminal Court, even the UN World Tourism Organization all became arenas in a contest for supremacy. Everything, it seemed, was now great-power competition.

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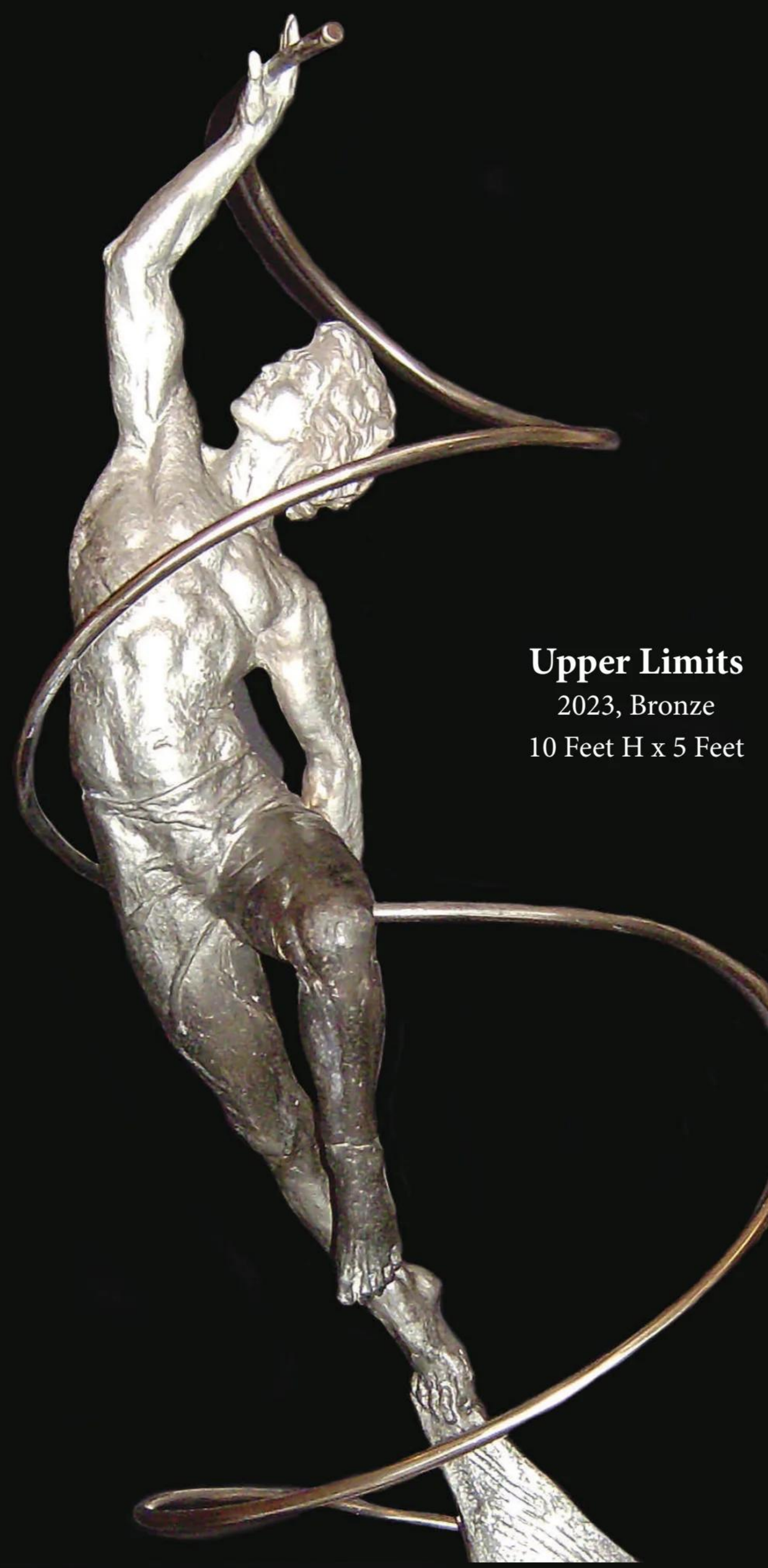

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In his first term, Trump emerged as one of the most compelling bards of great-power competition. "Our rivals are tough, they're tenacious, and committed to the long term—but so are we," he said in a speech in 2017. "To succeed, we must integrate every dimension of our national strength, and we must compete with every instrument of our national power." (Announcing his candidacy for president two years earlier, he was more characteristically blunt: "I beat China all the time. All the time.")

But having returned to office for a second term, Trump has changed tack. His approach remains abrasive and confrontational. He does not hesitate to threaten punishment—often economic—to force others to do what he wants. Instead of trying to beat China and Russia, however, Trump now wants to persuade them to work with him to manage international order. What he is telling now is a narrative of collusion, not competition; a story of acting in concert. After a call with Xi in mid-January, Trump wrote on Truth Social, "We will solve many problems together, and starting immediately. We discussed balancing Trade, fentanyl, TikTok, and many other subjects. President Xi and I will do everything possible to make the World more peaceful and safe!" Addressing business leaders gathered in Davos, Switzerland, that month, Trump mused that "China can help us stop the war with, in particular, Russia-Ukraine. And they have a great deal of power over that situation, and we'll work with them."

Writing on Truth Social about a phone call with Putin in February, Trump reported, "We both reflected on the Great History of our Nations, and the fact that we fought so successfully together in World War II. . . . We each talked about the strengths of our respective Nations, and the great benefit that we will someday have in working together." In March, as members of Trump's administration negotiated with Russian counterparts over the fate of Ukraine, Moscow made clear its view of a potential future. "We can emerge with a model that will allow Russia and the United States, and Russia and NATO, to coexist without interfering in each other's spheres of interests," Feodor Voitolovsky, a scholar who serves on advisory boards at the Russian Foreign Ministry and Security Council, told *The New York Times*. The Russian side understands that Trump grasps this prospect "as a businessman," Voitolovsky added. Around the same time, Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff, a real estate magnate who has been heavily involved in the negotiations with Russia, mused about the possibilities for U.S.-Russian collaboration in an

interview with the commentator Tucker Carlson. "Share sea lanes, maybe send [liquefied natural] gas into Europe together, maybe collaborate on AI together," Witkoff said. "Who doesn't want to see a world like that?"

In pursuing accommodations with rivals, Trump may be breaking with recent convention, but he is tapping into a deeply rooted tradition. The notion that rival great powers should come together to manage a chaotic international system is one that leaders have embraced at many points in history, often in the wake of catastrophic wars that left them seeking to establish a more controlled, reliable, and resilient order. In 1814–15, in the wake of the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars that engulfed Europe for almost a quarter century, the major European powers assembled in Vienna with the aim of forging a more stable and peaceful order than the one produced by the balance-of-power system of the eighteenth century, where great-power war occurred practically every decade. The result was "the Concert of Europe," a group that initially included Austria, Prussia, Russia, and the United Kingdom. In 1818, France was invited to join.

Concerts often mask rather than mitigate ideological frictions.

As mutually recognized great powers, members of the Concert were endowed with special rights and responsibilities to mitigate destabilizing conflicts in the European system. If territorial disputes arose, instead of seeking to exploit them to expand their own power, the European leaders would meet to seek a negotiated solution to the conflict. Russia had long eyed expansion into the Ottoman Empire, and in 1821, the Greek revolt against Ottoman rule seemed to provide Russia with a significant opportunity to do just that. In response, Austria and the United Kingdom called for restraint, arguing that a Russian intervention would wreak havoc on the European order. Russia backed down, with Tsar Alexander I promising, "It is for me to show myself convinced of the principles on which I founded the alliance." At other times, when revolutionary nationalist movements threatened the order, the great powers convened to guarantee a diplomatic settlement, even if it meant forgoing significant gains.

For around four decades, the Concert channeled great-power competition into collaboration. Yet by the end of the century, the system had collapsed. It had proved unable to prevent conflict among its members, and over the course of three wars, Prussia systemically defeated

Austria and France and consolidated its position as the head of a unified Germany, upending the stable balance of power. Meanwhile, intensifying imperial competition in Africa and Asia proved too much for the Concert to manage.

But the idea that great powers could and should take on the responsibility of collectively steering international politics took hold and reemerged from time to time. The concert idea guided U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt's vision of the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and China as "the Four Policemen" who would secure the world in the aftermath of World War II. The Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev imagined a post–Cold War world in which the Soviet Union would continue to be recognized as a great power, working with its former enemies to help order Europe's security environment. And as Washington's relative power appeared to wane at the beginning of this century, some observers urged the United States to cooperate with Brazil, China, India, and Russia to provide a similar modicum of stability in an emerging post-hegemonic world.

CARVING UP THE WORLD

Trump's interest in a great-power concert does not derive from a deep understanding of this history. His affection for it rests on impulse. Trump seems to see foreign relations much as he sees the worlds of real estate and entertainment, but on a larger scale. As in those industries, a select group of power brokers are in constant competition—not as mortal enemies, but as respected equals. Each is in charge of an empire that he may manage as he sees fit. China, Russia, and the United States may jockey for advantage in various ways, but they understand that they exist within—and are in charge of—a shared system. For that reason, the great powers must collude, even as they compete. Trump sees Xi and Putin as "smart, tough" leaders who "love their country." He has stressed that he gets along well with them and treats them as equals, despite the fact that the United States remains more powerful than China and far stronger than Russia. As with the Concert of Europe, it is the perception of equality that matters: in 1815, Austria and Prussia were no material match for Russia and the United Kingdom but were accommodated as equals nonetheless.

In Trump's concert story, the United States is neither a hero nor a victim of the international system, obligated to defend its liberal principles to the rest of the world. In his second inaugural address, Trump

promised that the United States would lead the world again not through its ideals but through its ambitions. With a drive to greatness, he promised, would come material power and an ability "to bring a new spirit of unity to a world that has been angry, violent, and totally unpredictable." What has become clear in the weeks since he gave this speech is that the unity Trump seeks is primarily with China and Russia.

In the great-power-competition narrative, those countries were positioned as implacable enemies, ideologically opposed to the U.S.-led order. In the concert narrative, China and Russia no longer appear as pure antagonists but as potential partners, working with Washington to preserve their collective interests. This is not to say that concert partners become close friends; far from it. A concert order will continue to see competition as each of these strongmen angles for superiority. But each recognizes that conflicts among themselves must be muted so that they can confront the real enemy: the forces of disorder.

It was precisely this story about the dangers of counterrevolutionary forces that laid the foundations for the Concert of Europe. The great powers set aside their ideological differences, recognizing that the revolutionary nationalist forces that the French Revolution had unleashed posed more of a threat to Europe than their narrower rivalries ever could. In Trump's vision of a new concert, Russia and China must be treated as kindred spirits in quelling rampant disorder and worrisome social change. The United States will continue to compete with its peers, especially with China on issues of trade, but not at the expense of aiding the forces that Trump and his vice president, JD Vance, have called "enemies within": illegal immigrants, Islamist terrorists, "woke" progressives, European-style socialists, and sexual minorities.

For a concert of powers to work, members must be able to pursue their own ambitions without trampling on the rights of their peers (trampling on the rights of others, in contrast, is both acceptable and necessary to maintaining order). This means organizing the world into distinct spheres of influence, boundaries that demarcate the spaces where a great power has the right to practice unfettered expansion and domination. In the Concert of Europe, great powers allowed their peers to intervene within recognized spheres of influence, as when Austria crushed a revolution in Naples in 1821, and when Russia brutally suppressed Polish nationalism, as it did repeatedly throughout the nineteenth century.

In the logic of a contemporary concert, it would be reasonable for the United States to allow Russia to permanently seize Ukrainian ter-

ritory to prevent what Moscow sees as a threat to regional security. It would make sense for the United States to remove "military forces or weapons systems from the Philippines in exchange for the China Coast Guard executing fewer patrols," as the scholar Andrew Byers proposed in 2024, shortly before Trump appointed him deputy assistant secretary of defense for South and Southeast Asia. A concert mindset would even leave open the idea that the United States would stand aside if China decided to take control of Taiwan. In return, Trump would expect Beijing and Moscow to remain on the sidelines as he threatened Canada, Greenland, and Panama.

Just as a concert narrative gives the great powers the right to order the system as they wish, it limits the ability of others to have their voices heard. The great European powers of the nineteenth century cared little for the interests of smaller powers, even on issues of vital importance. In 1818, after a decade of revolution in South America, Spain was faced with the final collapse of its empire in the Western Hemisphere. The great powers met in Aix-la-Chapelle to decide the fate of the empire and to debate whether they should intervene to restore monarchical power. Spain, notably, was not invited to the bargaining table. Likewise, Trump seems to have little interest in giving Ukraine a role in negotiations over its fate and even less desire to bring European allies into the process: he and Putin and their various proxies will sort it out by "dividing up certain assets," Trump has said. Kyiv will just have to live with the results.

THE SUM OF ALL SPHERES

In some instances, Washington should see Beijing and even Moscow as partners. For example, revitalizing arms control would be a welcome development, one that requires more collaboration than a narrative of great-power competition would have allowed. And in this respect, the concert narrative can be alluring. By turning over global order to strongmen running powerful countries, perhaps the world could enjoy relative peace and stability instead of conflict and disorder. But this narrative distorts the realities of power politics and obscures the challenges of acting in concert.

For one thing, although Trump might think that spheres of influence would be easy to delineate and manage, they are not. Even at the height of the Concert period, the powers struggled to define the boundaries of their influence. Austria and Prussia consistently clashed over control of the German Confederation. France and Britain struggled for dominance in

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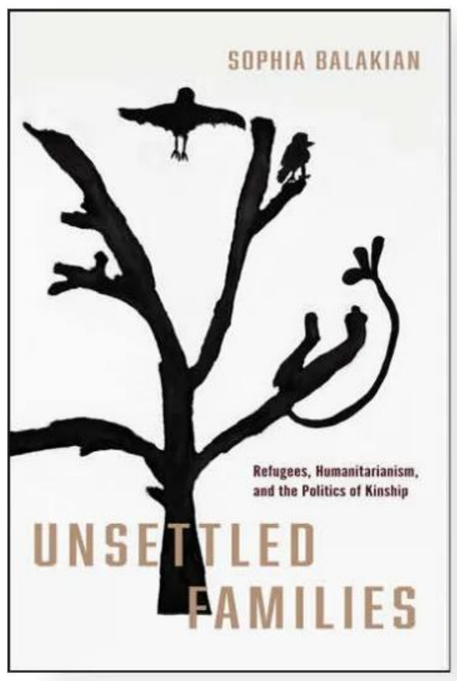

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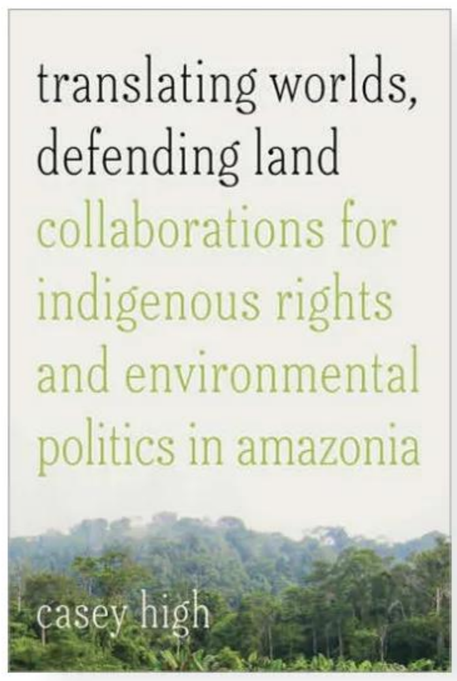
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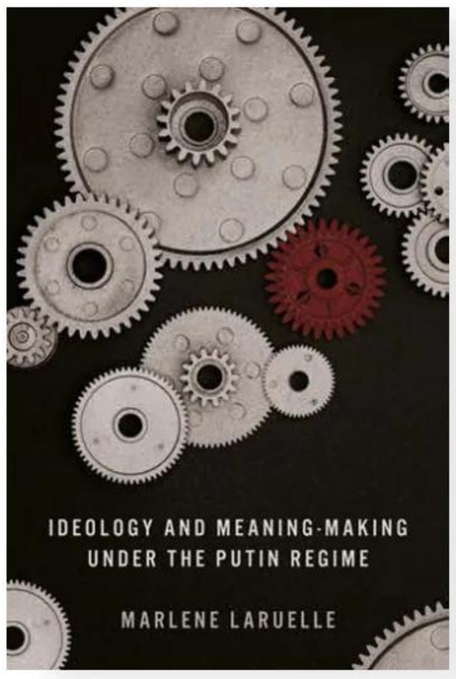

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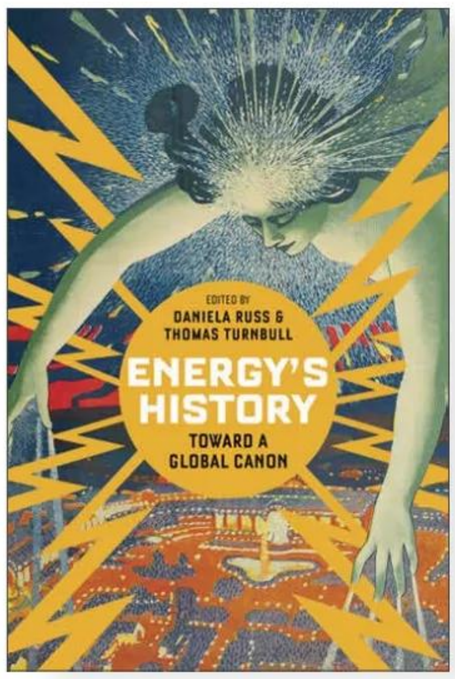

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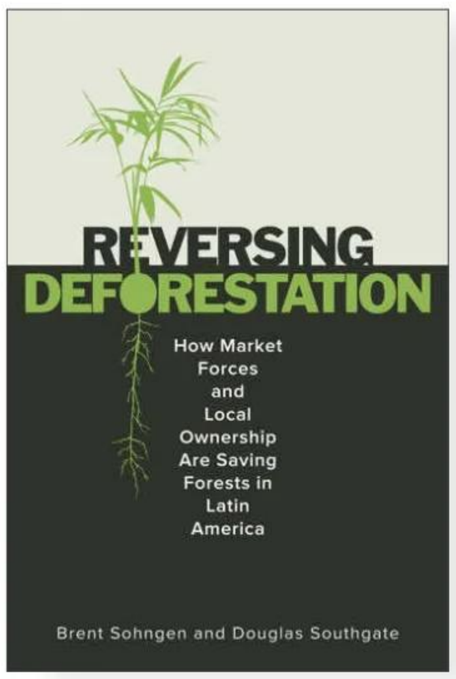
REVERSING DEFORESTATION
How Market Forces and Local Ownership Are Saving Forests in Latin America
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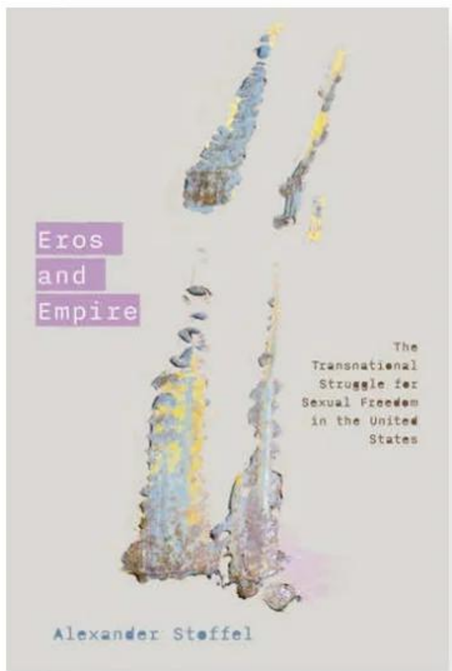

Eros and Empire
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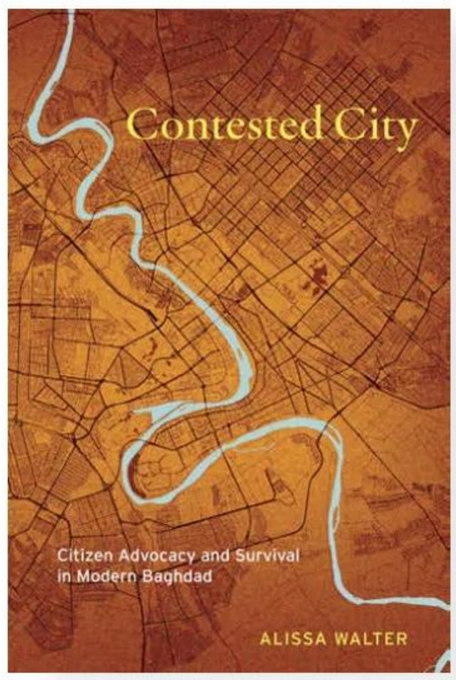

Contested City
Citizen Advocacy and Survival in Modern Baghdad
Alissa Walter

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the Low Countries. More recent attempts to establish spheres of influence have proved no less problematic. At the Yalta Conference in 1945, Roosevelt, the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill envisioned peacefully co-managing the post–World War II world. Instead, they soon found themselves battling at the boundaries of their respective spheres, first at the core of the new order, in Germany, and later at the peripheries in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan. Today, thanks to the economic interdependence brought on by globalization, it would be even more difficult for powers to neatly divide the world. Complex supply chains and streams of foreign direct investment would defy clear boundaries. And problems such as pandemics, climate change, and nuclear proliferation hardly exist inside an enclosed sphere, where a single great power can contain them.

Most leaders, despite how they might see themselves, are not Bismarcks.

Trump seems to think a more transactional approach can circumvent ideological differences that might otherwise pose obstacles to cooperation with China and Russia. But despite the ostensible unity of great powers, concerts often mask rather than mitigate ideological frictions. It did not take long for such rifts to emerge within the Concert of Europe. During its early years, the conservative powers, Austria, Prussia, and Russia, formed their own exclusive grouping, the Holy Alliance, to protect their dynastic systems. They saw the revolts against Spanish rule in the Americas as an existential threat, one whose outcome would reverberate across Europe, and as thus requiring an immediate response to restore order. But leaders in the more liberal United Kingdom saw the rebellions as fundamentally liberal, and although they worried about the power vacuum that could arise in their wake, the British were not inclined to intervene. Ultimately, the British worked with an upstart liberal country—the United States—to cordon off the Western Hemisphere from European intervention, tacitly supporting the Monroe Doctrine with British naval might.

It is not a stretch to imagine similar ideological battles in a new concert. Trump might care little about how Xi managed his sphere of influence, but images of China's using force to crush Taiwan's democracy would likely galvanize opposition in the United States and elsewhere, just as Russia's aggression against Ukraine angered democratic publics. So far, Trump has been able to essentially reverse U.S. policy on Ukraine and Russia without paying any political price. But

an Economist-YouGov poll conducted in mid-March found that 47 percent of Americans disapproved of Trump's handling of the war, and 49 percent disapproved of his overall foreign policy.

When great powers attempt to suppress challenges to a prevailing order, they often provoke a backlash, spawning efforts to break their grasp on power. National and transnational movements can chip away at a concert. In nineteenth-century Europe, the nationalist revolutionary forces that the great powers attempted to contain not only became stronger throughout the century but also forged ties with one another. By 1848, they were strong enough to mount coordinated revolutions across Europe. Although these revolts were put down, they unleashed forces that would ultimately deal a fatal blow to the Concert in the wars of German unification in the 1860s.

The concert narrative suggests that great powers can act jointly to keep the forces of instability at bay indefinitely. Both common sense and history say otherwise. Today, Russia and the United States might successfully impose order in Ukraine, negotiating a new territorial boundary and freezing that conflict. Doing so might produce a temporary lull but probably wouldn't generate a lasting peace, since Ukraine is unlikely to forget about its lost territory and Putin is unlikely to be satisfied with his current lot for long. The Middle East stands out as another region where great-power collusion is unlikely to foster stability and peace. Even if they were working together harmoniously, it is difficult to see how Washington, Beijing, and Moscow would be able to broker an end to the war in Gaza, head off a nuclear confrontation with Iran, and stabilize post-Assad Syria.

Challenges would also come from other states, especially from rising "middle" powers. In the nineteenth century, rising powers such as Japan demanded entrance to the great-power club and equal footing on issues such as trade. The most repressive form of European domination, colonial governance, eventually produced fierce resistance all over the world. Today, an international hierarchy would be even more difficult to sustain. There is little recognition among smaller countries that the great powers have any special rights to dictate a world order. Middle powers have already created their own institutions—multilateral free trade agreements, regional security organizations—that can facilitate collective resistance. Europe has struggled to build its own independent defenses but is likely to double down to provide for its own security and to aid Ukraine. Over the last several years, Japan has built up its own

networks of influence in the Indo-Pacific, positioning itself as a power more capable of independent diplomatic action in that region. India is unlikely to accept any exclusion from the great-power order, especially if that means the growth of China's power along its border.

To deal with all the problems that great-power collusion poses, it helps to have the skills of an Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian leader who found ways to manipulate the Concert of Europe to his advantage. Bismarck's diplomacy could even pull apart ideologically aligned allies. As Prussia prepared to go to war against Denmark to wrest control of Schleswig-Holstein in 1864, Bismarck's appeals to Concert rules and existing treaties sidelined the United Kingdom, whose leaders had pledged to secure the integrity of the Danish kingdom. He exploited colonial competition in Africa, positioning himself as an "honest broker" between France and the United Kingdom. Bismarck was opposed to the liberal, nationalist forces that were sweeping through mid-nineteenth-century Europe and was thus a reactionary conservative—but not a reactive one. He thought carefully about when to crush revolutionary movements and when to harness them, as he did in his pursuit of German unification. He was incredibly ambitious but not beholden to expansionist impulses, and often opted for restraint. He saw no need to pursue an empire on the African continent, for example, since that would only draw Germany into a conflict with France and the United Kingdom.

Alas, most leaders, despite how they might see themselves, are not Bismarcks. Many more closely resemble Napoleon III. The French ruler came to power as the 1848 revolutions were winding down and believed that he had an exceptional capacity to use the Concert system for his own ends. He attempted to drive a wedge between Austria and Prussia to expand his own influence in the German Confederation, and he tried to organize a grand conference to redraw European boundaries to reflect national movements. But he thoroughly failed. Vain and emotional, susceptible to flattery and shame, he found himself either abandoned by great-power peers or manipulated into doing the bidding of others. As a result, Bismarck found in Napoleon III the dupe he needed to push German unification forward.

In a present-day concert, how might Trump fare as a leader? It's possible he could emerge as a Bismarckian figure, bullying and bluffing his way into advantageous concessions from other great powers. But he might also get played, winding up like Napoleon III, outmaneuvered by wilier rivals.

COOPERATION OR COLLUSION?

After the Concert was established, the European powers remained at peace for almost 40 years. This was a stunning achievement on a continent that had been wrecked by great-power conflict for centuries. In that sense, the Concert might offer a viable framework for an increasingly multipolar world. But getting there would require a story that involves less collusion and more collaboration, a narrative in which great powers act in concert to advance not merely their own interests but broader ones, as well.

What made the original Concert possible was the presence of like-minded leaders who shared a collective interest in continental governance and the aim of avoiding another catastrophic war. The Concert also had rules to manage great-power competition. These were not the rules of the liberal international order, which sought to supplant power politics with legal procedures. They were, rather, jointly generated "rules of thumb" that guided the great powers as they negotiated conflict. They established norms about when they would intervene in conflicts, how they would apportion territory, and who would be responsible for the public goods that would maintain the peace. Finally, the original Concert vision embraced formal deliberation and moral suasion as the key mechanism of collaborative foreign policy. The Concert relied on forums that brought the great powers into discussions about their collective interests.

It is hard to imagine Trump crafting that sort of arrangement. Trump seems to believe he can build a concert not through genuine collaboration but through transactional dealmaking, relying on threats and bribes to push his partners toward collusion. And as a habitual transgressor of rules and norms, Trump seems unlikely to stick to any parameters that might mitigate the conflicts among great powers that would inevitably crop up. Nor is it easy to imagine Putin and Xi as enlightened partners, embracing self-abnegation and settling differences in the name of the greater good.

It is worth remembering how the Concert of Europe ended: first with a series of limited wars on the continent, then with imperial conflicts erupting overseas, and, finally, with the outbreak of World War I. The system was ill equipped to prevent confrontation when competition intensified. And when careful collaboration devolved into mere collusion, the concert narrative became a fairy tale. The system came crashing down in a paroxysm of raw power politics, and the world was set ablaze.

The Return of Great-Power Diplomacy

How Strategic Dealmaking Can Fortify American Power

A. WESS MITCHELL

Since returning to office in January, U.S. President Donald Trump has sparked an intense debate about the role of diplomacy in American foreign policy. In less than three months, he initiated bold diplomatic overtures to all three of Washington's main adversaries. He opened talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin about ending the war in Ukraine, is communicating with Chinese leader Xi Jinping about holding a summit, and sent a letter to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei about bringing that country's nuclear program to an end. In parallel, his administration has made it plain that it intends to renegotiate the balance of benefits and burdens in Washington's alliances to ensure greater reciprocity.

Trump's opening moves have drawn howls of protest and prompted accusations of appeasement. But the fact is that Washington was in dire

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Illustration by Anuj Shrestha

need of a new kind of diplomacy. After the end of the Cold War, the United States moved away from using negotiations to promote the national interest. Convinced that history had ended and that they could remake the world in America's image, successive U.S. presidents came to rely on military and economic force as the primary tools of foreign policy. When they did use diplomacy, it was usually not to enhance U.S. power but to try to build a global paradise in which multilateral institutions would supplant countries and banish war entirely.

Great-power rivalry is back, and systemic war is a very real possibility.

For a time, the United States could get away with such negligence. In the 1990s and the early years of this century, Washington was so powerful that it could achieve its aims without old-fashioned diplomacy. But those days are gone. The United States no longer possesses a military that is capable of fighting and defeating all its foes simultaneously. It cannot drive another great power to ruin through sanctions. Instead, it lives in a world of continent-size rivals with formidable economies and militaries. Great-power war, absent for decades, is again a real possibility.

In this dangerous setting, the United States will need to rediscover diplomacy in its classical form—not as a bag carrier for an all-powerful military or as a purveyor of global norms, but as a hard-nosed instrument of strategy. For millennia, great powers have used diplomacy in this way to forestall conflict, recruit new partners, and splinter enemy coalitions. The United States must take a similar path, using talks and deals to limit its own burdens, constrain its enemies, and recalibrate regional balances of power. And that requires engaging with rivals and reworking alliances so that Washington does not need to take the lead in confronting Beijing and Moscow simultaneously.

Talking with China and Russia and insisting on reciprocity from friends is therefore necessary. If done right, it could help manage the gaps between the United States' finite means and the virtually infinite threats arrayed against it, something many other great powers have used diplomacy to accomplish. Indeed, the essence of diplomacy in strategy is to rearrange power in space and time so that countries avoid tests of strength beyond their ability. There is no magic formula for how to get this right, and there is no guarantee that Trump's approach will succeed. But the alternative—attempting to overpower everybody—is not viable,

and a good deal riskier. In other words, strategic diplomacy is the best shot America has at shoring up its position for protracted competition.

ANCIENT WISDOM

In the summer of 432 BC, the leaders of Sparta gathered to consider whether to go to war with Athens. For months, tensions had been building between the two city-states as the Athenians clashed with Sparta's friends and the Spartans sat idly by. Now a group of hawks, egged on by the allies, were eager for action.

But Archidamus II, Sparta's aging king, suggested something different: diplomacy. Talks, Archidamus told the assembly, could forestall conflict while Sparta worked to make new allies and strengthen its hand domestically.

> I do bid you not to take up arms at once, but to send and remonstrate with [the Athenians] in a tone not too suggestive of war, nor again too suggestive of submission, and to employ the interval in perfecting our own preparations. The means will be, first, the acquisition of allies, Hellenic or barbarian it matters not . . . [,] and secondly, the development of our home resources. If they listen to our embassy, so much the better; but if not, after the lapse of two or three years our position will have become materially strengthened. . . . Perhaps by that time the sight of our preparations, backed by language equally significant will have disposed [the Athenians] to submission, while their land is still untouched, and while their counsels may be directed to the retention of advantages as yet undestroyed.

At first, Archidamus's address did not sway the assembly; the Spartans voted for war. But in the weeks that followed, the city realized it was unready for battle, and the old man's wisdom sank in. Sparta sent envoys far and wide to slow the rush to war and pull other city-states to its side. When war came a year later, Sparta was in a better position to wage it. And when Sparta triumphed two decades later, it was not because it had the better army but because it had assembled a bigger and better array of allies—including an old archenemy, Persia—than did Athens.

Archidamus's suggestions have worked for countless other great powers over the centuries. Consider, first, using diplomacy to buy time and prepare for war. When new barbarian tribes appeared, the Romans, the Byzantines, and the Song dynasty all made it a practice to send envoys in an effort to buy time for replenishing armories and granaries. The Roman Emperor Domitian struck a truce with the Dacians that allowed

Rome to recollect its strengths until a new emperor, Trajan, was ready for war a decade later. Venice brokered a long peace with the Ottomans after the fall of Constantinople to beef up its fleets and fortresses. And the French chief minister Cardinal Richelieu used diplomacy to stall with Spain for nearly a decade so that France could mobilize.

Archidamus's next suggestion—form alliances to constrain the enemy's options—has been similarly enduring. The French kings allied with the heretic Lutherans and infidel Ottomans to restrict their fellow Catholic Habsburgs. The Habsburgs allied with the Bourbons to constrain the Prussians. Edwardian Britain cooperated with its colonial rivals France and Russia to join forces against imperial Germany.

In each of these cases, success meant cultivating favorable balances of power in critical regions. This is perhaps the core purpose of strategic diplomacy—and what allows countries to project power far beyond their material capabilities. The Vienna system engineered by Austrian Foreign Minister (and later Chancellor) Klemens von Metternich used the balance of power to extend his empire's position as a great power well beyond its natural lifespan. German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck pulled off a similar feat in the late nineteenth century. By cutting deals with Austria, Russia, and the United Kingdom, he was able to isolate France and avoid a two-front war that might have strangled the German empire in its infancy.

These leaders never tried to forge partnerships based on anything other than shared interests. They did not believe they could transform hostile countries into friendly ones through logic and reason. They certainly never believed that diplomacy could overcome irreconcilable visions of how the world should be. Their goal was to limit rivals' options, not seek to remove the sources of conflict. Departing from that logic can lead to catastrophe, as occurred when British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain met with German leader Adolf Hitler in 1938. Rather than use diplomacy to amplify the domestic and international constraints on Hitler, Chamberlain weakened them by giving him what he wanted in hopes that German expansionism would then cease. Doing so emboldened Berlin and paved the way for World War II.

The United States made a similar mistake in the 1990s. Instead of trying to constrain a rising Beijing after the Soviet Union fell, Washington used commercial diplomacy to remove the barriers constraining Chinese economic expansion. U.S. officials negotiated Beijing's accession to the World Trade Organization and opened U.S. markets to

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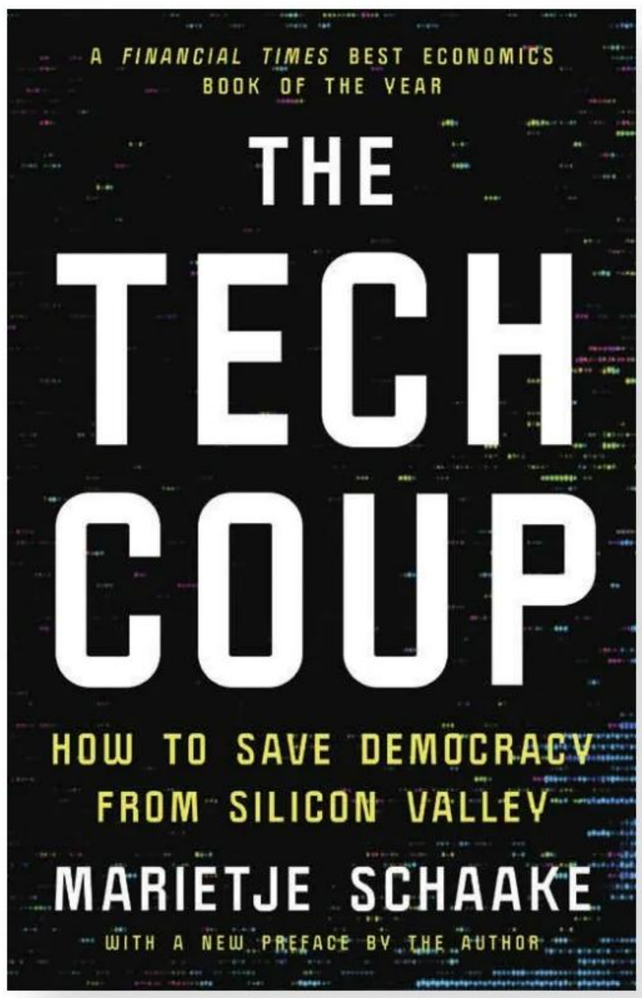
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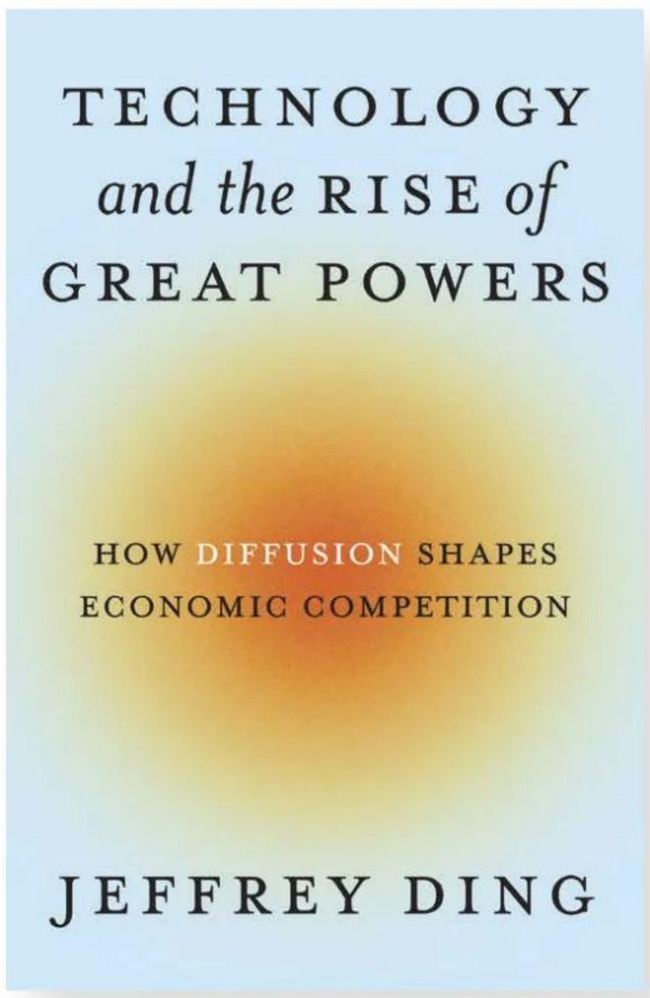

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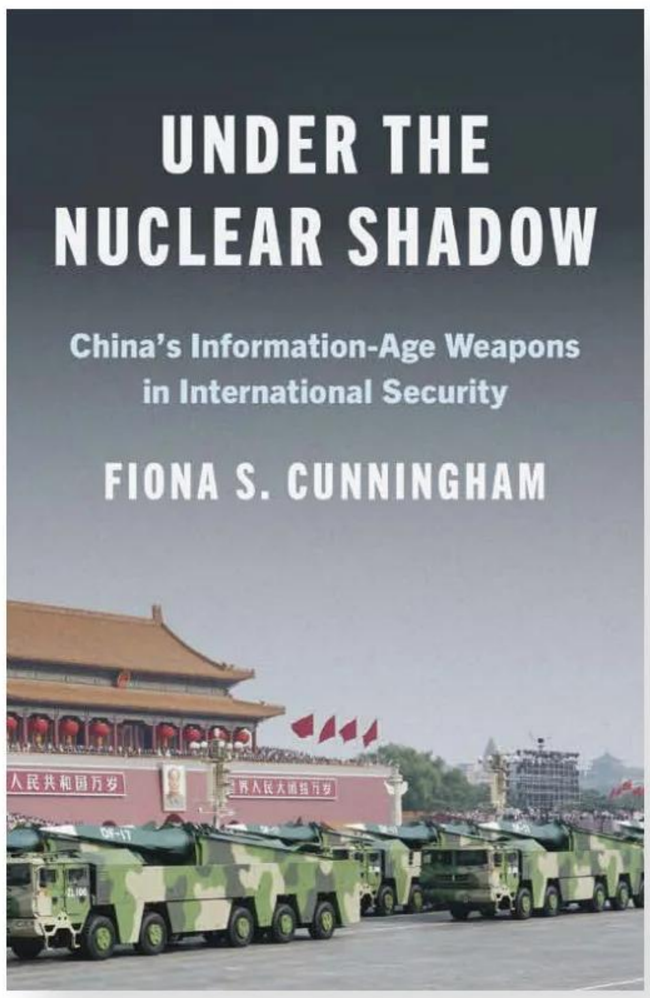

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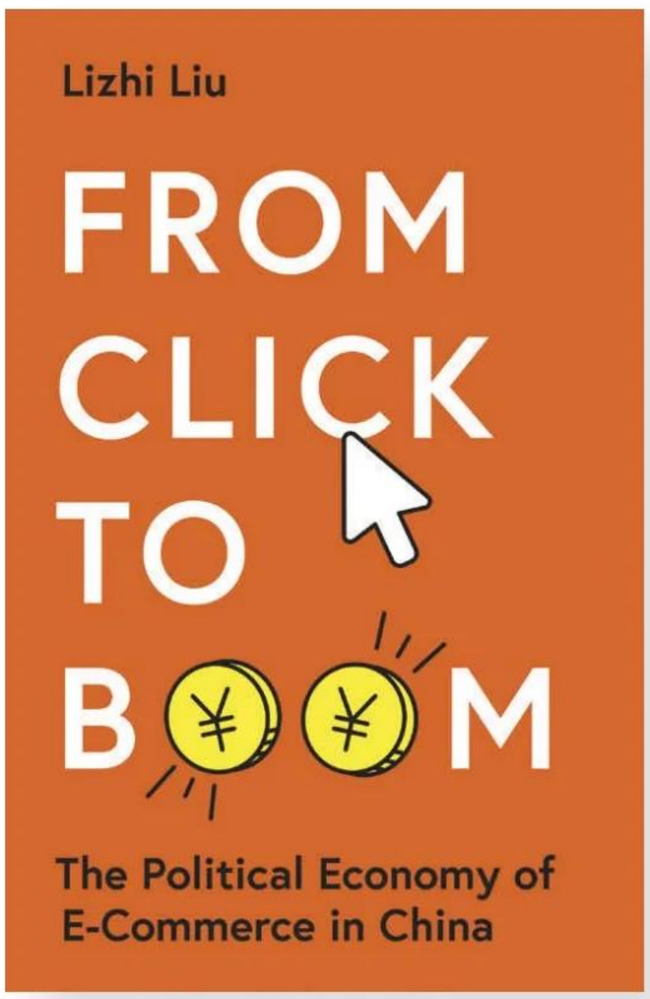

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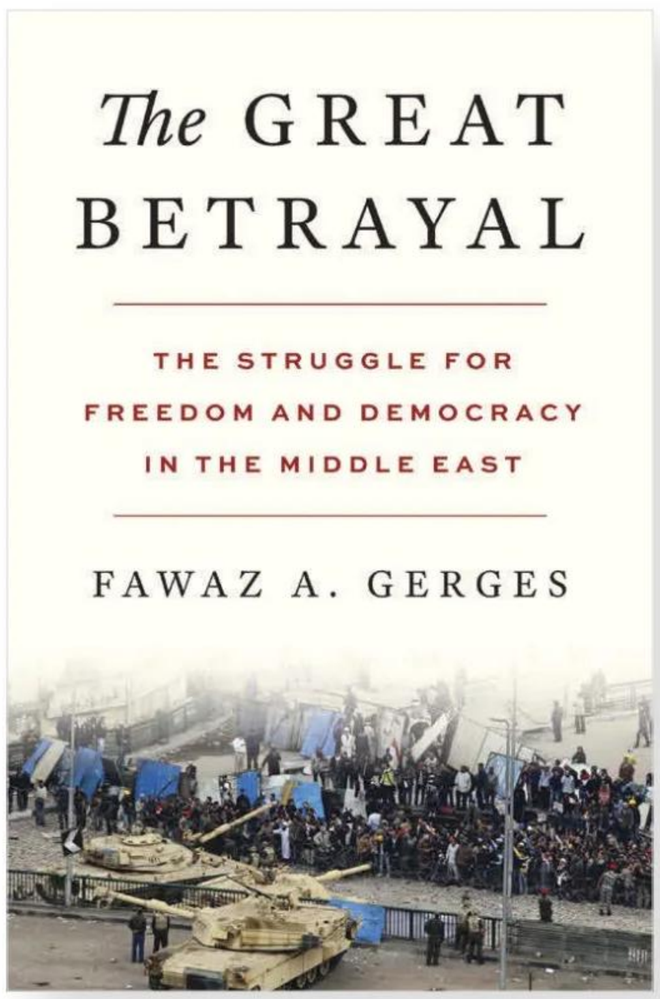

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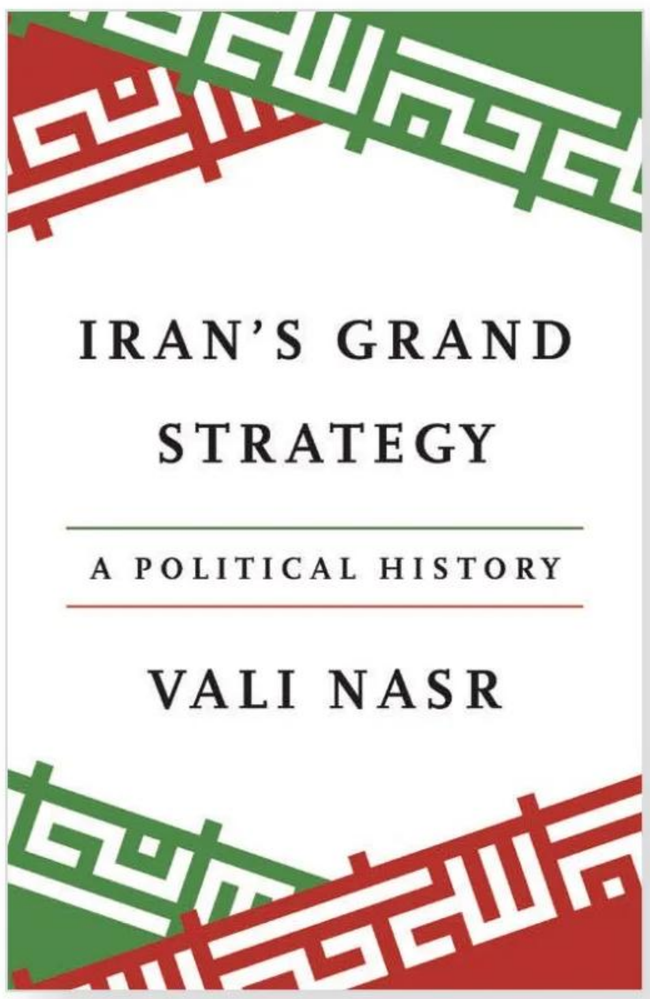

A gripping account that overturns simplistic portrayals of Iran as a theocratic pariah state, revealing how its strategic moves on the world stage are driven by two pervasive threats—external aggression and internal dissolution

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

Chinese companies. Doing so, Washington thought, would transform China into a liberal democracy. But instead, Beijing exploited this opening to consolidate control, get rich, and gain the economic upper hand over other countries. Today, China's manufacturing dominance is so profound that even the American military is dependent on many Chinese-made products. As a result, Washington's options would be greatly constrained during a war with Beijing.

DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR

The American post–Cold War approach to China came about because U.S. leaders believed they no longer needed strategic diplomacy. By the 1990s, after all, there were no more great powers with which to compete. With the Soviet Union's collapse, the United States enjoyed a margin of superiority that would have been unimaginable to earlier great powers. Instead of trying to shape the behavior of rivals, Washington embraced the much more expansive goal of transforming them into liberal societies.

In this unusual setting, most American officials adopted one of two attitudes toward diplomacy. The first camp believed the world was moving toward a globalized utopia and saw diplomacy as a means of speeding that process by building rules and institutions above the level of the state. The second believed the United States could attain comprehensive security through military-technological means and saw diplomacy as a quixotic or pusillanimous enterprise that dishonored and weakened the country.

Both these notions predate the end of the Cold War. For all his legendary realism, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was an idealist who believed that the job of American diplomats was to eventually create a world federation. U.S. President Ronald Reagan, hardly a merchant of peace at any price, found his photograph juxtaposed next to that of Chamberlain in a full-page ad (paid for by Republican hawks) in *The Washington Times* after he embarked on nuclear talks with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. After the Berlin Wall came down, both notions flourished. Liberals saw the Soviet collapse as evidence that paradise was nigh, and hard-liners saw it as evidence that diplomacy was not needed. Diplomacy had been declared dead before, but never had the rigor mortis been so advanced.

But rumors of history's demise were premature. Liberalism, it turns out, did not expunge geopolitics from the human story. China, Iran, and Russia did not transform into liberal societies. On the contrary, they

all became confident, civilizational states that remain determined to dominate their regions. Today, great-power rivalry is back, and systemic war is a very real possibility.

Neither liberals nor hawks have viable solutions to this problem. All the international institutions in the world can't prevent a shooting war between the United States and China or Russia or both. And as the last two National Defense Strategies acknowledge, the U.S. military is not postured or equipped to fight wars against two major rivals at the same time. Washington can and should reinvest in its military. But thanks to China's and Russia's advances and the enormous U.S. deficit, it would require a generational effort to make the American military into one capable of matching all its enemies simultaneously.

> It is unlikely that Russia can be cleaved entirely from China.

To compensate, Washington will have to return to strategic diplomacy. It must, as Archidamus would say, remonstrate with its adversaries in "a tone not too suggestive of war, nor again too suggestive of submission," and use the interval gained to get alliances and home resources into a better state for war in the hope of avoiding it. Like past great powers, Washington can start by reducing tensions with the weaker of its main rivals in order to concentrate on the stronger. That is what Kissinger and his boss, U.S. President Richard Nixon, did when they warmed ties with Beijing so the United States could better focus on Moscow in the early 1970s.

Today, the weaker rival is Russia. This has become all too obvious as Ukraine has chewed through Moscow's military resources. The United States should thus aim to use Russia's depleted state to its advantage, seeking a détente with Moscow that disadvantages Beijing. The goal should be not to remove the sources of conflict with Russia but to place constraints on its ability to harm U.S. interests.

This process should begin by bringing the war in Ukraine to an end in a way that is favorable to the United States. That means that when all is said and done, Kyiv must be strong enough to impede Russia's westward advances. To achieve this end, the American officials negotiating a peace agreement should learn from the failure of the 2022 Istanbul talks between Kyiv and Moscow, which treated a political settlement as the goal and worked backward toward a cease-fire. Doing that enabled Russia to make its political demands—neutering the Ukrainian state through caps on the size of its army and changing its constitution—a

precondition to peace. A better model would be 1950s Korea: to prioritize an armistice and push questions about a wider settlement into a separate process that could take years to bear fruit, if it ever does. Washington should still be willing to push the Ukrainians to cede territory when doing so is necessary. But it should make Ukrainian sovereignty a precondition for talks and use U.S. sanctions, military assistance, and seized Russian assets to bring Moscow around.

The United States should pursue a defense relationship with Ukraine akin to the one it maintains with Israel: not a formal alliance, but an agreement to sell, lend, or give Kyiv what it needs to defend itself. But it should not grant Ukraine NATO membership. Instead, the United States should push European states to take responsibility for Ukraine—and for the security of their continent more generally.

To nudge Europe along, American policymakers can again learn from the Nixon administration, which developed a doctrine whereby the United States agreed to provide nuclear protection for its treaty allies in the secondary region (then Asia, now Europe) but expected local states to provide their own conventional defense. As an economic corollary, Nixon's treasury secretary, John Connally, pressured allies to lower restrictions on U.S. goods and increase the value of their currencies to boost American industry. Today, a Nixon-style arrangement might entail a new transatlantic grand bargain in which the United States provides extended deterrence and certain strategic systems to Europe but allies provide the bulk of the frontline fighting capabilities. In the economic domain, Washington might demand reciprocity in market access and stipulate that allies can benefit from U.S. innovation only if they nix regulatory standards that impede it. The goal should be to get allies to accept American standards, not vice versa, and to collectively train the West's sights on Beijing.

So far, the Trump administration seems to be moving in this direction. It persuaded both Russia and Ukraine to pause attacks on each other's energy infrastructure. It upped its leverage, including by convincing Saudi Arabia to increase oil production and by ending Biden's exemption of energy-related banking transactions from sanctions. It signed a mineral deal with Ukraine that increases the connection between the two countries without making Washington responsible for Kyiv's defense. And its sterner tone toward Europe has prompted the continent's largest increase in defense spending in generations: nearly $1 trillion. Trump's opening tariffs have roiled the Europeans

but could also restart talks about a new transatlantic grand bargain in trade for the first time in a decade. All this may well lead to better outcomes for the United States, provided that Washington keeps its eyes on the prize—which is not disruption itself, but disruption in service of strategic renovation.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

Once the United States has secured an end to the war in Ukraine, American diplomats can begin more actively trying to complicate Moscow's relationship with Beijing. This, too, will prove tricky. It is unlikely that Russia can be cleaved entirely from China: the countries have more in the way of shared interests, and a more genial political connection, than when Nixon traveled to Beijing. But their interests are not identical. Russia has become very dependent on China since the start of the war in Ukraine, and dependence in geopolitics always chafes. Russia's financial and technological dependence on China, in particular, has increased significantly as a result of the war. The Chinese are also supplanting Russia in its accustomed sphere of influence in Central Asia. And they have obtained a controlling stake in the infrastructure of Siberia and Russia's Far East, to the extent that Moscow's real sovereignty in those places is increasingly in doubt.

This raises an old dilemma for Moscow: whether it is a primarily European or Asian power. Washington should exploit that tension. The goal is not to woo Russia into a conciliatory stance, much less convert it into a U.S. ally, but to create the conditions for it to pursue an eastward rather than westward vector in its foreign policy. U.S. officials should resist Russian efforts to forge a new grand bargain that would involve American concessions in eastern NATO states, which would confirm Russia's westward vector, and instead seek a compartmentalized détente aimed at heightening the constraints on Russia in areas in which its interests are at odds with the United States' and relaxing constraints in areas in which they align. To do so, Washington might lift restrictions preventing Asian allies from offering investment alternatives to China in Russia's eastern territories if Moscow meets U.S. demands on Ukraine.

The same logic should extend to arms control. Because of attrition suffered in its invasion of Ukraine, Russia will need to reconstitute its conventional armed forces, which could require diverting funds from its long-range nuclear arsenal. The situation is reminiscent of the

mid-1980s, when the Soviet Union faced financial pressure to reduce spending on strategic nuclear weapons. Reagan used this as an opportunity to strike a new arms deal with Gorbachev, a model Trump might replicate by offering Moscow a revised arms control framework that sets stricter limits than the countries' previous accord. The goal should be to force the Russians to accept risk in their strategic arsenal to reduce U.S. two-peer deterrence requirements. Washington could then turn most of its nuclear attention to Beijing's buildup. Such an agreement could also create daylight between China and Russia by foiling the former's desire to see the United States saddled with an arms race in Europe.

Washington can use strategic diplomacy to deal with another potential nuclear threat: Iran. The United States has a strong interest in derailing that country's ambitions while limiting the need for future American military interventions in the region. The prospects for success have been enhanced by Israel's recent neutralization of Iranian proxies and air defenses, which gives Washington a chance to expand on the template of the Abraham Accords by fostering Israeli-Saudi normalization. Israel's successful regional military campaign also means the United States can peel off old Iranian surrogates like Lebanon and Syria. In Syria, success will require that U.S. diplomacy promote an internal balance of power that gives a role to the Kurds while keeping Islamist factions backed by Turkey and Qatar at bay. At the same time, the United States should work with Turkey on areas of shared interest, such as Ukraine, and encourage reconciliation between Turkey and U.S. allies such as Greece, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.

The prospects for successful American diplomacy with Iran will increase in proportion to the overall position of strength that the new administration is able to assemble across the region. Although it is hard to imagine Iran giving up its nuclear program, the moment to attempt a gambit like the one Trump made with his recent letter to Khamenei is now, when Tehran holds weaker cards, and the U.S. better ones, than has been the case in a very long time.

POSITION OF STRENGTH

Then there is China. That country poses the stiffest challenge of perhaps any rival in American history. U.S. officials will not be able to contain China in the way they did the Soviet Union; it is simply too

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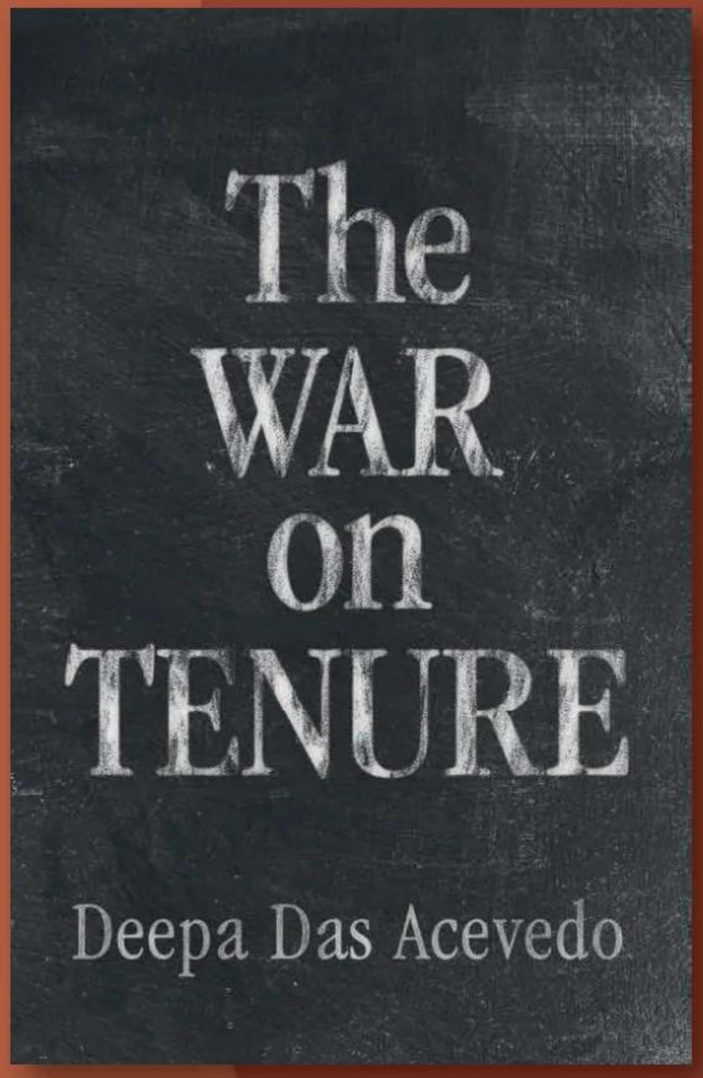

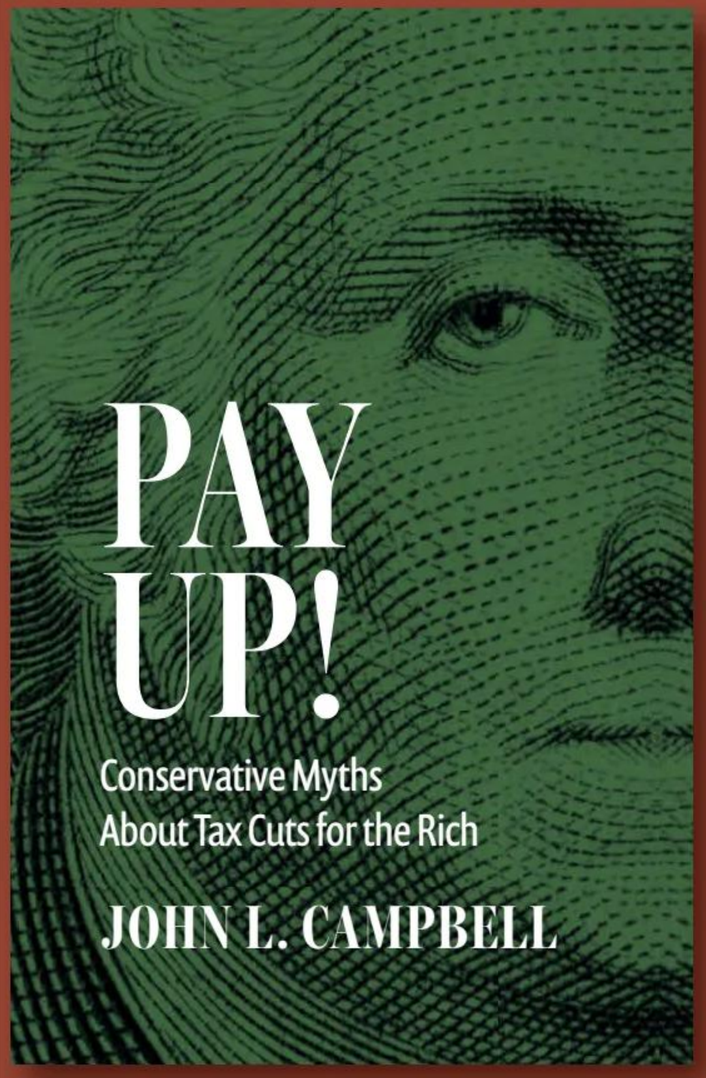

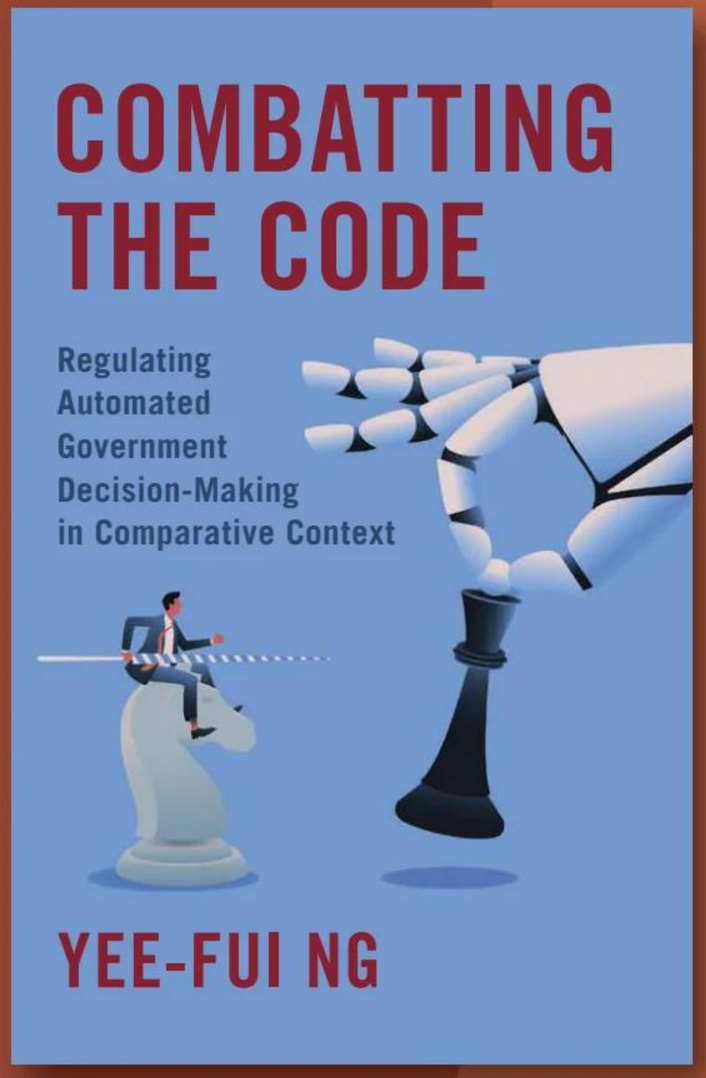

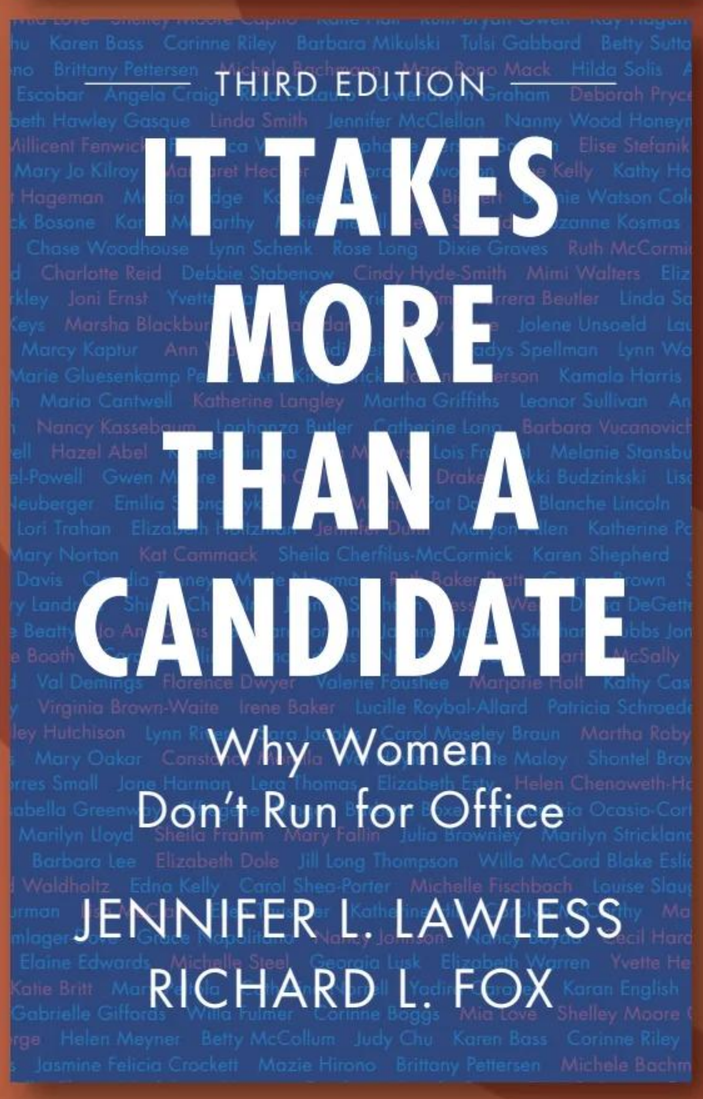

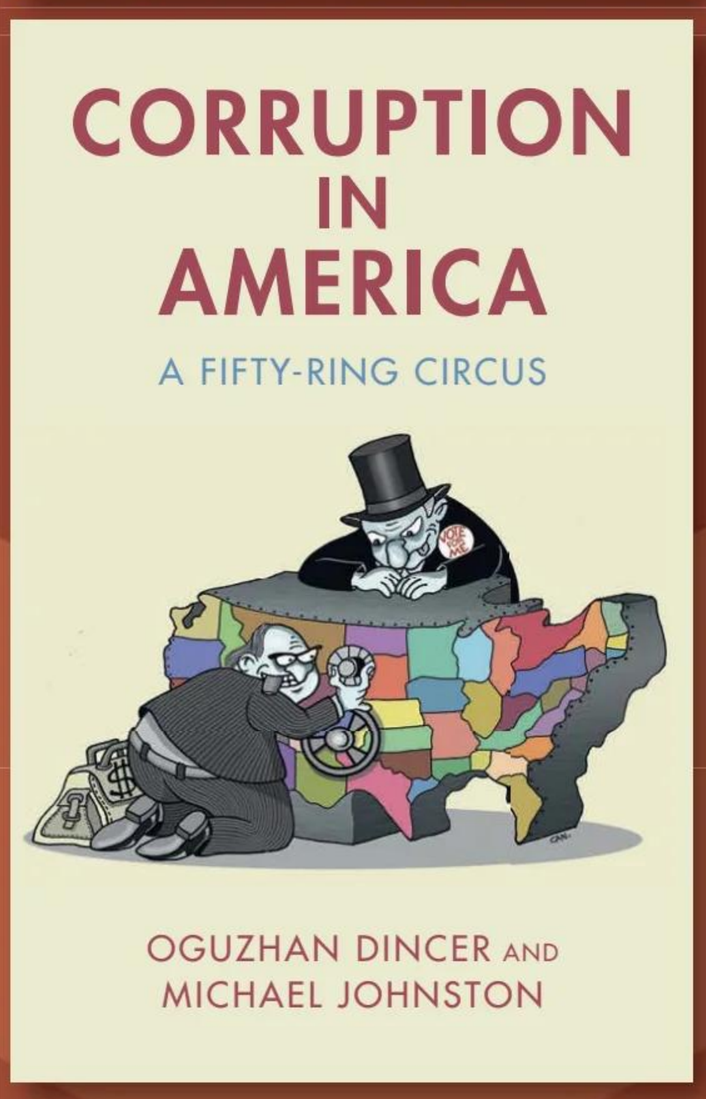

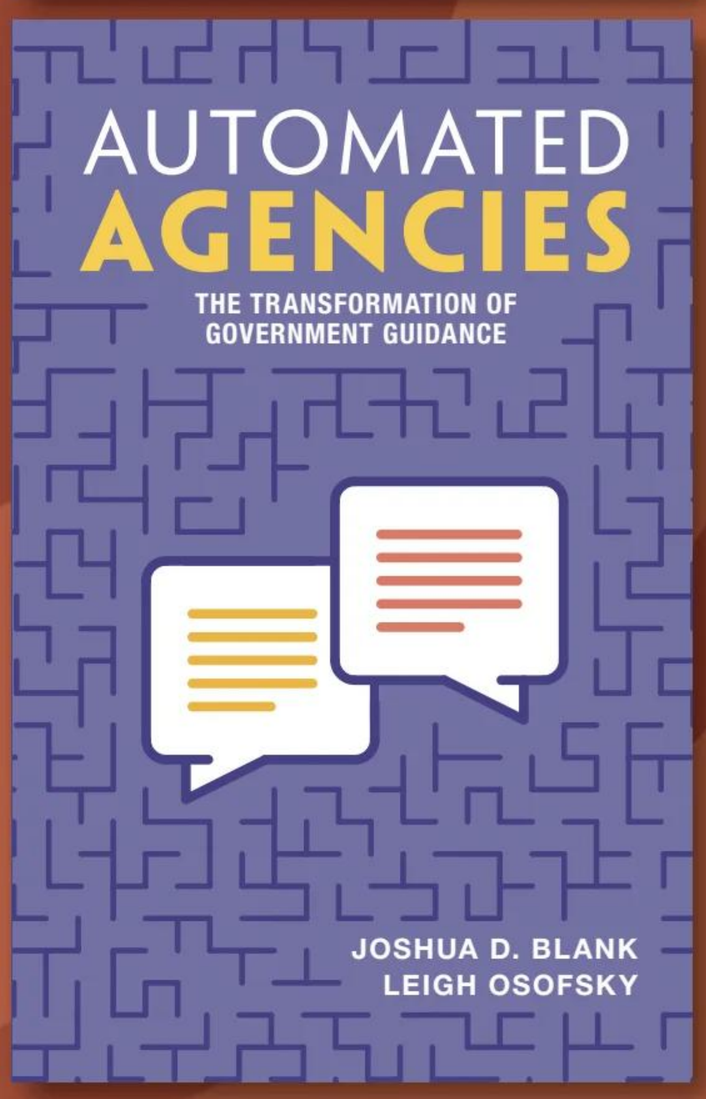

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large and too integrated into the world economy. But Washington should try in every way possible to isolate it by turning off its viable options for forming anti-American coalitions. The goal of U.S. diplomacy should be to build the biggest coalitions possible against Beijing while amassing a position of domestic economic strength and, on that basis, seeking a new modus vivendi that favors American interests.

Ground zero for such a strategy is Asia. China is flanked in all directions by countries with which it has tense relations. India and Nepal have land disputes with China; Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam have arguments with China at sea. American diplomacy should use these dynamics to encourage a regional balance of power that limits Chinese options for military expansion.

> The job of diplomacy is not to transcend geopolitics but to succeed at it.

So far, the United States has a mixed track record in this respect. President Joe Biden's administration nominally continued the first Trump administration's emphasis on treating Beijing as Washington's primary competitor. It ramped up rhetorical support for Taiwan; expanded cooperation with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or the Quad, comprising Australia, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States; deepened defense cooperation with the Philippines; and worked to mend rifts between Japan and South Korea. But all these initiatives took shape as Washington cut back the U.S. military presence in Asia to focus on crises in Europe and the Middle East. The result was a gap between U.S. rhetoric and capabilities. With Taiwan, for example, the Biden administration broke with its predecessors in undermining strategic ambiguity but simultaneously diverted U.S. military strength to Europe and the Middle East. Washington also sought more help from its Pacific allies for objectives far away from Asia, such as weapons for Ukraine and participation in sanctions against Russia.

With China, the gap between the Biden administration's rhetoric and its capabilities created a paradoxical situation in which the United States positioned itself as both provocative and weak. The White House was provocative in that it talked a big game on disputes such as the future of Taiwan, but it was weak because it reduced the U.S. regional military presence. The lack of respect from China was clear starting in March 2021, when the senior Chinese foreign policy official Yang Jiechi harangued U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken

at a meeting in Anchorage about promoting U.S. democracy. What followed was four years of what some have called "zombie diplomacy," in which China presented the Biden administration with two options that, for Beijing, were both wins. In one, Washington could relinquish its support for Taiwan, reduce the U.S. military presence in the region, and open U.S. markets and investment to China in exchange for a working relationship. The other was military confrontation. Washington, for its part, treated the preservation of the relationship as an end in itself. It also tried to rope off climate change from geopolitics, which the Chinese refused to do. As a result, the United States encumbered itself with emissions restrictions that hurt American industries as China continued building coal-fired power plants. These missteps meant the Biden administration never managed to create a position of strength for effective bilateral diplomacy.

Going forward, the U.S. approach should be the reverse: to minimize rhetoric and maximize actions that enhance Washington's leverage for direct diplomacy. At home, that means increasing energy production, reducing the deficit, and deregulating to strengthen the economy. In Asia, it means pressing for greater reciprocity with allies in tariffs and sharing the defense burden, as well as strengthening the United States' military deterrent in the Indo-Pacific. The goal of pressing friends should be to recalibrate these alliances so that they are more beneficial to Washington and, over time, to draw them more deeply into the U.S. financial and military-industrial systems. The goal of strengthening Washington's presence should be to reassure partners that U.S. pressure is designed to create stronger alliances, not to pave the way for abandonment, as well as to ensure that resisting China is viable for countries that are frightened by Beijing.

As it strengthens its alliances, the Trump administration should pay particular attention to India. The Biden administration failed to properly activate New Delhi against Beijing because it was too busy fighting with India's government over unrelated things. The White House, for example, threatened sanctions on India for purchasing Russian weapons and levied them on Indian companies for buying Russian oil. It also criticized New Delhi on human rights grounds (although less than some of its progressive critics would have liked) and brought pressure to bear on a pro-Indian government in Bangladesh, whose subsequent ouster may now ease the way for Chinese inroads in Southeast Asia.

The Trump administration should instead pull India closer to the United States. It should treat New Delhi as an ally on the level of Japan or of NATO partners when it comes to technology transfers, and it should try to ramp up plans for an economic corridor running from India to the Middle East to Europe as a counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative. It should jettison the Biden administration's practice of criticizing India for perceived democratic backsliding and explore a pledge of political support and defense cooperation to New Delhi as it tries to protect its territory from China and Pakistan.

Washington should use the strength generated by rebuilding itself at home and forging better alliances abroad to negotiate for a more favorable balance of power with Beijing. For instance, the Trump administration might use its improved position to insist on a reduced trade deficit with China and expanded access for American financial institutions operating there. It could encourage Chinese investment in targeted industries in the United States. Washington could even attempt a currency revaluation that would benefit both countries. China already wants a stronger renminbi so it can be used to help settle regional transactions, and a weaker dollar could support the U.S. administration's efforts at reindustrialization.

There is no contradiction for Washington between engaging with China and attempting to rebalance relations with Indo-Pacific allies. Great powers throughout history have often found that rivals can act as a productive fillip to friends. Bismarck, for example, used talks with Russia to prompt Austria, Germany's treaty ally, to strengthen its military—which in turn pushed Russia toward accepting Bismarck's demands. The key is making sure that allies know there is a limit to how far their patron's engagement with adversaries will go. Diplomacy with adversaries is about gaining temporary advantages that constrain the other side; diplomacy with allied states is about longer-term entanglements that give the central power more freedom. Calibrating the two in a way that motivates allies but does not alienate them is the art of diplomacy.

So far, the Trump administration's moves with China augur well. The White House is holding out the possibility of a summit with Xi, but it has been coy about the timing. In the interim, it has concentrated on amassing leverage through tariffs and by prioritizing the Indo-Pacific in new defense spending plans. Should détente with Russia, U.S. efforts to rebalance its portfolios with allies, and the use

of diplomacy in the Middle East pay off, Washington will enjoy an even stronger position vis-à-vis Beijing.

All of these policies will, of course, take time to bear fruit. But if the administration can combine the threads effectively, the United States will have the best shot at restructuring its relationship with China since the 1990s, when it fatefully opened up to its adversary.

BACK TO BASICS

The United States is bound to confront many challenges as it works to revive strategic diplomacy as a tool of foreign policy. But in comparison with those of earlier great powers, the country's circumstances are auspicious. The United States has a unique ability, rooted in its open political system, meritocratic society, and dynamic economy, to undo unforced errors and rejuvenate itself as a global power. Diplomacy can help this effort along by translating these advantages into strategic gains in key regions that improve the U.S. position for long-term competition.

For strategic diplomacy to work, however, the United States must get back to basics—as U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio is endeavoring to do. Its Foreign Service officers should be schooled in negotiation as a core competency; they currently are not. They should all be trained in military and economic matters, which is also not happening. U.S. diplomatic funding and priorities should be brought tightly into alignment with the National Security Strategy. And American diplomats should be barred from promoting progressive causes that embolden opponents and undermine friends—causes that most Americans do not support.

This reemphasis will disappoint those who think that diplomacy's primary role is to promote values or create rules and structures above the level of the state. That fallacy is now deeply entrenched in the U.S. mindset, thanks to generations of leaders who believed that diplomacy would create a liberal utopia. But humanity is not progressing toward an apotheosis. War and competition are permanent realities. The job of diplomacy is not to transcend geopolitics but to succeed at it. Diplomacy is neither capitulation nor the doorway to nirvana. It is an instrument of strategy that states use to survive amid the pressure of competition. When applied with skill, it can produce benefits that far exceed the costs. And in these dangerous times, that is worth rediscovering.

The Russia That Putin Made

Moscow, the West, and Coexistence Without Illusion

ALEXANDER GABUEV

Russian President Vladimir Putin's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine changed the course of history. It did so most directly, of course, for the Ukrainians subjected to this brutal act of aggression. But the war also changed Russia itself far more than most outsiders grasp. No cease-fire, not even one brokered by a U.S. president fond of his Russian counterpart, can reverse the degree to which Putin has made confrontation with the West the organizing principle of Russian life. And no cessation of hostilities in Ukraine can roll back the extent to which he has deepened his country's relationship with China.

As a result of the war, Putin's Russia has become much more repressive, and anti-Westernism has only become more pervasive throughout Russian society. Since 2022, the Kremlin has conducted a sweeping campaign to quash political dissent, spread pro-war and anti-Western propaganda domestically, and create broad classes of Russians that benefit materially from the war. Tens of millions of

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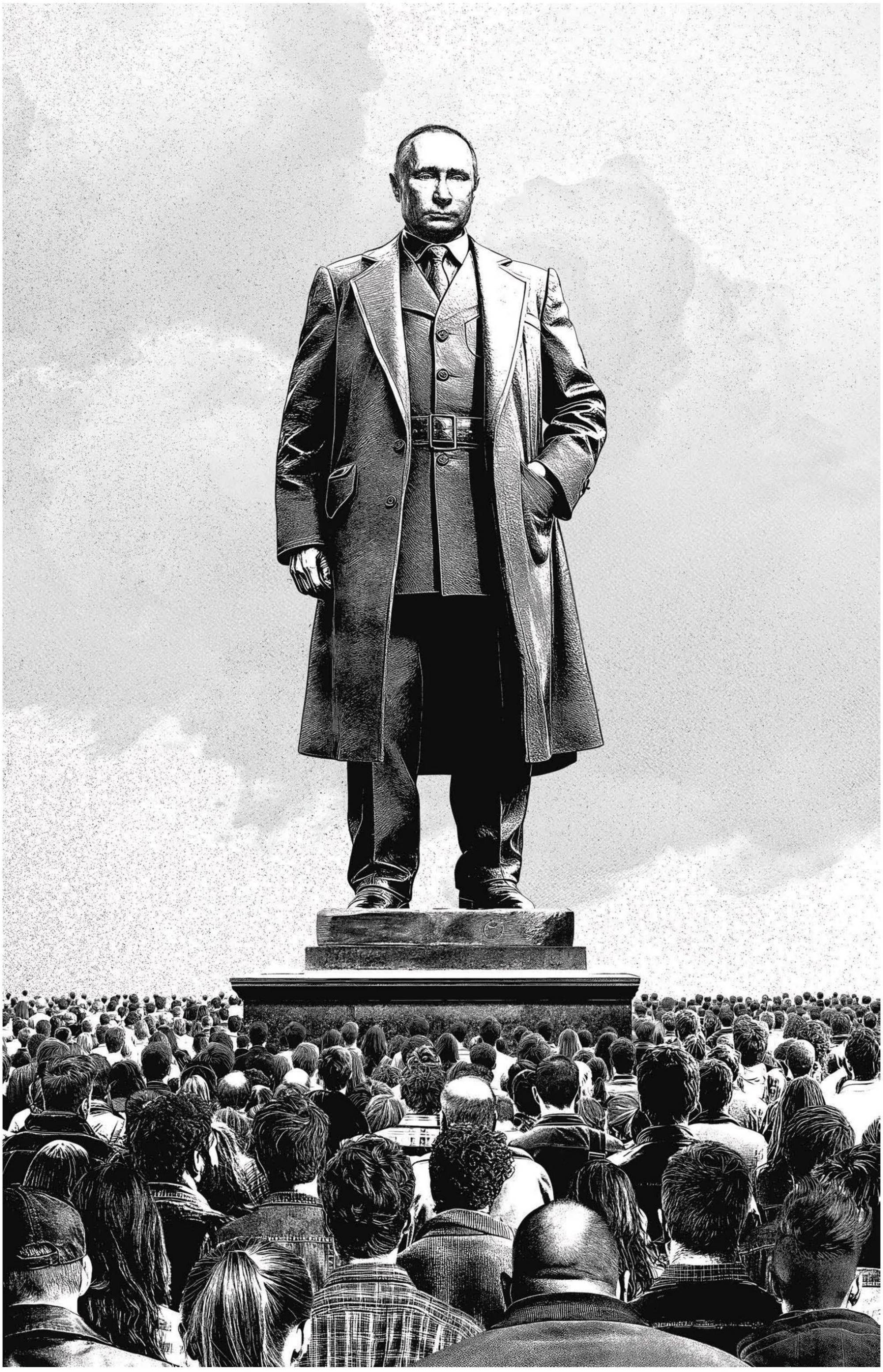

Illustration by Gregori Saavedra

Russians, including senior officials and many of the country's wealthiest people, now view the West as a mortal enemy.

For three years, U.S. and European officials showed remarkable resolve in countering Putin's aggression. But they also, at times unwittingly, played into Putin's narratives that the West resents Russia and that its conflict with the country is existential. Western leaders' strategy was marred by an absence of a coherent, long-term approach to Russia paired with rhetoric that could suggest it had a grander design than it did. In 2024, for example, Kaja Kallas—then the prime minister of Estonia and now the EU's top diplomat, as the vice president of the European Commission and the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy—stated that Western leaders should not worry that NATO's commitment to a Ukrainian victory could cause Russia to break apart. The Kremlin's propaganda machine eagerly circulated this statement to prove that dismembering Russia is the West's endgame.

> Tens of millions of Russians now view the West as a mortal enemy.

U.S. President Donald Trump has disrupted the transatlantic alliance's unity by seeking a swift end to the war. But even if Trump's overtures to Putin yield a superficial thaw in the U.S.-Russian relationship, Putin's fundamental mistrust of the West will make a genuine reconciliation impossible. He cannot be sure that Trump will successfully push Europe to restore ties with Russia, and he knows that in 2028, a new U.S. administration may simply make another policy U-turn. Few American corporations are lining up to get back into Russia. And Putin will not divest from his strategic relationship with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. The Kremlin will continue to embrace Chinese technology (including tools of digital repression), maintain its reliance on China's markets and financial system, and deepen its security ties with Beijing, even if that puts it on a collision course with Washington.

The distastefulness of Trump's appeasement strategy could nonetheless push other leaders, particularly in Europe, to double down on a containment approach or even display outright hostility toward Russia. But that, taken alone, would be a mistake. Putin's regime will almost certainly not collapse from within. Deterrence must therefore remain the cornerstone of Western policy, and especially European strategy, at least in the near term.

Someday, however, Putin will be out of the picture. Even if, as is likely, Russia's next leaders arise from his inner circle, they will have more flexibility in crafting the country's trajectory—and some practical motives to correct course. Although its people are not restive, Putin's Russia is internally weak. The most obvious way for Putin's successors to improve the country's position would be to rebalance its foreign policy. So even as Europe's leaders shore up deterrence against Russia, they must start preparing to seize the window of opportunity that will open with Putin's exit from the stage.

They must come up with a vision of a new kind of relationship with Russia, one shorn of the illusion that to become a solid economic and strategic partner for the West, the country must transform as completely as West Germany did after World War II. They must propose specific terms for a peaceful coexistence, such as arms control strategies and forms of economic interdependence that preclude weaponization by either side. And European leaders (as well as U.S. politicians who do not share Trump's pro-Putin inclination) should begin communicating that vision by making all their Russia-related communications clearer—even, for instance, their announcements about increasing their countries' military budgets.

Not everyone in the Kremlin shares Putin's anti-Western obsession. In private, many Russian elites admit that the war in Ukraine was not only a moral crime but a strategic mistake. The easier it is for such pragmatists to imagine a better relationship with Western countries, the likelier they will be to prevail during the inevitable infighting that will follow the end of the Putin era. Changing the West's message to Russia is not only good preparation for the future; it is also good policy for the present. If Western leaders stop reinforcing the Kremlin's narrative that they are determined to foment open-ended confrontation with Russia, that could, in turn, diminish the appeal of populists on both the far right and the far left who claim that the defense-industrial complex is bent on making war forever.

But if, instead, Western leaders continue to suggest that it is useless even to discuss a more mutually beneficial form of coexistence with Russia, they risk setting the Kremlin's future leaders on a dangerous path, feeling that they have no choice but to perpetuate all of Putin's postures, including his dependence on China. Some in the West may feel that the past three years have taught them

that they have very little ability to shape Russia's trajectory. But they have tools they have not yet fully used—ones they would be unwise to surrender.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

During Putin's first two stints in the Kremlin—between 2000 and 2008—Russia's GDP nearly doubled thanks to ballooning commodity prices, an inflow of Western investment, market reforms, and an entrepreneurship boom. Compared with Russia's dictatorial tsarist and communist eras and its chaotic decade after the Soviet Union fell, the country had never been so prosperous and so free at the same time. Although economic growth tailed off in the 2010s, the social contract remained largely intact.

Over the course of the war in Ukraine, however, the Russian economy and the social contract that economy propped up have undergone substantial changes. In *Foreign Affairs* in January 2024, the economist Alexandra Prokopenko described the situation the Kremlin faced as an "impossible trilemma." The Kremlin needed to fund an increasingly costly war, maintain citizens' living standards, and safeguard Russia's macroeconomic stability—goals that could not be achieved simultaneously.

But Putin solved the puzzle. He chose to focus on funding war: between 2025 and 2027, the Russian government plans to spend about 40 percent of its state budget on defense and security, shortchanging other priorities such as health care and education. War has been good, economically, for a majority of Russians. After dipping slightly in 2022, Russia's GDP grew by 3.6 percent in 2023 and by another 4.1 percent in 2024, thanks to defense spending. Major economic downsides from the war, such as double-digit inflation, began to emerge only in late 2024. Even after the guns fall silent in Ukraine, Russia's economy will remain heavily militarized. The defense industry will have to replenish the military's colossal loss of equipment, and Putin has embarked on an expensive military modernization plan.

If the war in Ukraine restarts or continues, Russians' economic situation may become much bleaker. But that scenario is unlikely to generate serious pressure for regime change. The more the Russian economy has come under duress, the more Moscow has moved to strengthen repression. The Kremlin has criminalized criticizing the war and the Russian military, and it has launched high-profile legal cases against

prominent and little-known dissidents alike. The regime has also dramatically expanded the number of people it officially deems "foreign agents" and its attacks on organizations considered "undesirable," presenting war critics with a stark choice: exile abroad or prison at home. Police and security forces have every incentive to pursue such cases because officers are rewarded for the number of enemies they expose.

As Putin rendered the cost of criticizing his war prohibitive, he simultaneously made it a vehicle for wealth redistribution. Its prime beneficiaries, of course, have been members of his entourage and their patronage networks. Some of them have taken advantage of the departure of foreign and multinational corporations from Russia by buying depreciated assets or simply confiscating them, generally with the support of powerful insiders, such as the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. Beyond the superrich, however, are tens of thousands of other opportunists who have benefited from war, such as the entrepreneurs who make money from sanctions-busting. Further down the totem pole, hundreds of thousands of white-collar professionals—particularly in IT, finance, and business services—are benefiting from higher salaries as their dissident peers emigrate and their skills become scarcer.

> Even after the guns fall silent in Ukraine, Russia's economy will remain militarized.

Finally, Putin has purchased support by buying off men mobilized to the front, workers in military plants, and their family members. According to the Kremlin, in June 2024 about 700,000 Russians were on the frontline. The average Russian soldier's salary is now close to $2,000 a month, twice the national average and four times the overall average in the dozens of regions that have contributed the most conscripts. Since the start of the invasion, over 800,000 Russian troops have been killed or wounded; the government has sent up to $80,000 to their families for each casualty or death. The Kremlin's financial outlays have thus created a large group of people who owe their material advancement—and their career prospects—to an unjust war. In 2024, the Kremlin launched a program to train and place veterans in public-sector or government work.

War has also become a means for Russian public-sector workers to achieve upward social mobility. Civilian bureaucrats have a new career springboard: working in the occupied territories hastens their

promotions. For the hundreds of thousands of Russians employed in counterintelligence and law enforcement, catching Western and Ukrainian agents and neutralizing antiwar activists and journalists is now a way to climb the career ladder. All this has made the Russian bureaucracy much more political. Even in formerly relatively pragmatic institutions such as the central bank, Western-trained technocrats are becoming warriors who fight Western sanctions.

Long before the full-scale war in Ukraine, and thanks to Putin's repression, Russian society suffered from inertia and learned helplessness. But in recent years, the Kremlin has pursued extensive social engineering to embed distrust of the West in the Russian psyche. In September 2022, it introduced into all schools weekly propaganda sessions that teach pro-war narratives disguised as patriotism lessons. The state has become more interventionist in entertainment and culture, forcing independent-minded musicians, artists, and writers into exile; labeling dissident writers "extremist"; and organizing show trials of liberal intellectuals who opposed the war. Taking inspiration from the Chinese Communist Party, the Kremlin has sought to build a digital iron curtain, outlawing Instagram and Facebook and throttling YouTube, which nearly half of Russians over the age of 12 had previously used daily.

Of course, a black swan event could blow up this "Fortress Russia." The recent, sudden collapse of Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria demonstrated that even the most brutal regimes may be more fragile than they appear. But the outright fall of Putin's regime remains unlikely. If the cash it needs to buy off potential critics starts to evaporate, that can be compensated for by more state brutality.

WAR DANCE

The war in Ukraine did not temporarily divert Russian foreign policy. It has changed it for good. Russia's foreign policy has become subordinated to three goals: building alliances to support its war effort, sustaining an economy targeted by sanctions, and taking revenge on the West for its support of Ukraine. Russian officials have made major new investments in partnerships with regimes and entities willing to impose additional costs on the West, particularly North Korea, Iran, and Iranian proxies such as the Houthi militia in Yemen.

If the war ends and the United States lifts its sanctions, the Kremlin might temporarily halt some of its most audacious

anti-American activities, including providing weapons to U.S. foes such as the Houthis. But it will retain the capacity to resume those activities once the Trump team is out of the door. The Kremlin has also worked to maintain and expand its ties to developing countries around the world by heavily discounting Russian commodities and boosting exports to India and Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.

Most notably, Russia has decisively turned toward China. Before the war, the two countries were locked in a state of asymmetric interdependence, in which China had more leverage but Russia hedged its bets by maintaining trade, financial, and technological ties with Europe. Since 2022, however, Putin has accepted a much deeper dependence on China in exchange for Beijing's war support. The Kremlin has managed to prosecute the war for three years thanks only to the flow of critical weapons components from China. The Russian economy has remained afloat because China now buys 30 percent of Russian exports, up from 14 percent in 2021, and supplies 40 percent of its imports, up from 24 percent before the war. Beijing also affords Moscow a yuan-denominated financial infrastructure with which to conduct foreign trade.

Russia has gambled that this dependence will pay off. Because Beijing is Washington's primary opponent, strengthening China is, in the Kremlin's view, a strategic investment in the demise of American global primacy. For that reason, Russia now supplies China with weapons designs it hesitated to share before 2022. It has encouraged its labs and universities to contribute to the Chinese innovation ecosystem, initiating joint Chinese-Russian projects in the natural sciences, applied mathematics, IT, and space. The number of Russians who work for Chinese companies such as Huawei has mushroomed. Moscow supplies China with cheap commodities such as oil and gas via land routes, securing Beijing's access to resources in the event of a maritime blockade, as well as uranium for China's nuclear weapons program.

BATTEN DOWN THE HATCHES

During his 2024 reelection campaign, Trump promised to "un-unite" China and Russia. In a sense, as president, he appears to be trying to do so with his warm overtures to Putin. But no matter what efforts Trump makes, Russia under Putin will never be a country that does

not pose a threat to Europe and the United States. Europe will need to keep working to deter the Russian regime's capabilities—and prepare to do it with far less U.S. support. European leaders should still frame this endeavor as a transatlantic one, best pursued through NATO or, if Trump's team will not engage, with a team of senior U.S. allies that includes foreign policy practitioners, military leaders, and American defense industry leaders.

The first priority is to scale up defense production. Analysts sometimes present this as a straightforward challenge, but it is not. If policymakers turn toward shoring up Europe's security without simultaneously addressing the continent's own anemic economic growth, they will only embolden populists who argue against increased defense spending and call for appeasing Putin.

A forever war between Russia and the West is not inevitable.

Europe and the United States must also counter Russia's so-called shadow war. Moscow has developed a variety of ways to undermine democracies' security and politics, including acts of sabotage, targeted killings, online disinformation, and interference in elections. The Kremlin is proud of these inventions, and its use of them will likely persist past any cease-fire in Ukraine. No framework with Russia for managing hybrid-war escalations exists; one must be developed. The United States, as well as Europe, will need to make generational investments in counterintelligence, counterterrorism, and fighting organized crime; the organic emergence of radical Islam and far-right extremism in Europe has created a ripe environment for the Kremlin to exploit.

Alongside strengthening deterrence, however, Western leaders, and particularly European ones, must start conceiving of a different approach to Russia. The country that Putin's successors will inherit will almost certainly be profoundly imbalanced thanks to years of military overinvestment, waning access to cutting-edge technologies, excessive reliance on China, and the way that the war in Ukraine exacerbated already adverse demographic trends. Given how thoroughly Russia's military, intelligence, and law enforcement elites have invested in the war in Ukraine and prospered from it, Putin's successors will have little immediate incentive to make a clean break with the past. Not even the most pragmatic Russians will want an

adversarial relationship with China. But a sizable pragmatist faction within the Russian elite understands that the war in Ukraine was a disaster and may well want to gradually unwind the most toxic aspects of Putin's legacy—but only if they know that the door could open on the Western side.

SOFTEN THE GROUND

Changing the West's message to Russia—and making that new message coherent—will be a tall order, and not only because Trump has shattered the transatlantic alliance's unity. Within Europe, different governments hold different views on Russia. But European policymakers and American politicians who do not want to follow Trump's approach can start by concretely imagining the contours of a more stable security relationship.

If events proceed along their current trajectory, NATO and Russia will soon both be armed to the teeth with conventional weapons, including tanks and drones, as well as strategic ones, such as hypersonic nuclear missiles. The risks that emanate from this scenario are familiar from the Cold War, and so is the remedy: arms control with robust verification mechanisms and communications channels for managing incidents. If Western and Russian negotiators can build sufficient trust, the next step would be to ink agreements that impose cuts on conventional and strategic weapons arsenals (similar to the U.S.-Russia Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, which is set to expire in 2026, or the Treaty of Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, which NATO and Russia suspended in 2023). Both sides could discuss ways to limit their interference in each other's domestic politics if Russia is ready to put its efforts to subvert democracies to rest.

Economic interdependence was once a source of prosperity for both Russia and the West. By the time of Putin's departure, Europe is likely to have fully unwound its reliance on Russian commodities. If it has, then resuming imports of some Russian raw materials would not threaten Europe's independence; it would further diversify European supply chains. Restoring trade ties would also benefit Russia by reducing its dependence on the Chinese market.

No substantial rapprochement between Russia and the West can occur, however, without addressing the criminal war Putin launched against Ukraine. Even if Moscow and NATO begin arms control

talks on missiles, for instance, no substantively new equilibrium can be established as long as a threatened Kyiv is still building them. Any future project to restore full economic ties with Russia will need to generate funds for Ukraine's reconstruction or even for some form of reparations.

Moscow, of course, is unlikely ever to accept that word's presence in any official document. But a special tax on Russian commodities sold to Europe, for instance, could generate funds for Ukraine for an agreed number of years. Or international actors could establish a fund for Ukraine's reconstruction into which Russia pays a certain percentage of its GDP for a certain period. The faster the Russian economy grows, the more money Ukraine will get, creating incentives for the EU to buy Russian commodities and invest in the country.

Many European countries will want to involve Ukraine when crafting any strategy toward Russia after Putin. For many in Kyiv, a permanently weakened or even destroyed Russia may seem like the best eventual outcome. But such an outcome would hardly serve Europe's interests, given the danger posed by the collapse of an enormous neighbor whose territory teems with weapons of mass destruction. NATO membership for Ukraine is anathema to Putin now, and his successors may turn out to be just as hostile to it. But more pragmatic Russian leaders may finally appreciate that having Ukraine in NATO is a lesser threat to Russia than a vengeful Ukraine unbound by the alliance's rules and discipline.

TURN SIGNAL

To present this new vision to Russians, Western countries must urgently revive the communications channels they let wither during the war. It must be made clear to the Russian people and elites alike that the Kremlin wants to isolate Russia from the West, not the other way around. Artists, scientists, intellectuals, and athletes who did not circulate war propaganda should not be canceled simply for being Russian, and Europe needs to adjust its visa policies, which currently make it almost impossible for Russians to travel to the continent.

In public messaging, Western leaders and officials must tirelessly stress that they do not oppose Russians, only Putin's disastrous policy choices. They should argue that these choices have made Russians themselves less prosperous and secure. Western officials

also need to restore a more sustained contact with the Kremlin bureaucrats and foreign-policy elites who will become the backbone of Russia's state apparatus after Putin. They can do so first at international forums, where discussions with Russian interlocutors will serve existing common interests, such as preventing unintended provocations at sea and in the air. Obviously, many Russian interlocutors will be attempting to collect their own intelligence. But that is hardly a new risk.

Imagining Russia after Putin may seem too distant and abstract, especially after efforts to oust him failed—including, most prominently, the mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin's 2023 mutiny. Thinking about ways to reconnect with Russia could even seem divisive. The unity that the West achieved on Ukraine before Trump's reelection was an achievement. Now, with a pro-Putin president in the White House, European unity may seem even more precious. But many European countries, particularly those on NATO's eastern flank, simply do not want to think about any kind of détente with the Kremlin even after Putin's departure.

Yet they must. Western leaders need to face and address the concerns of their own citizens, many of whom do not want a costly open-ended confrontation with Russia. And imagining a pragmatic relationship would not be a mere intellectual exercise. It could be a tool to urge Russia toward a transition. Even if Putin would never react warmly to Western overtures, their existence could fragment his regime after he leaves. Putin has not groomed a successor because he fears the erosion of his power. If he eventually designates one, that person will be much weaker than he has been, creating space for rival political forces to jockey for influence. Even if no all-out succession battle erupts, Russia's post-Putin transition may resemble the period in the 1950s after Stalin's death, in which the emergence of de facto collective leadership allows for a turn toward liberalization and pragmatism.

The recent change in U.S. leadership caught Europe unprepared. So will a sudden changing of the guard in the Kremlin unless the West more actively imagines what its relationship with Russia could be after Putin. A forever war that cycles between cold and hot is not inevitable. But if Western leaders postpone discussing a different vision, they risk abetting Putin's efforts to make confrontation with the West a permanent legacy.

The Once and Future China

How Will Change Come to Beijing?

RANA MITTER

芮纳 · 米德：英国历史学家，专注研究现代中国史（共和国时期）

If you dropped in to China at any point in its modern history and tried to project 20 years into the future, you would almost certainly end up getting it wrong. In 1900, no one serving in the late Qing dynasty expected that in 20 years the country would be a republic feuded over by warlords. In 1940, as a fractious China staggered in the face of a massive Japanese invasion, few would have imagined that by 1960, it would be a giant communist state about to split with the Soviet Union. In 2000, the United States helped China over the finish line in joining the World Trade Organization, ushering the country into the liberal capitalist trading system with much fanfare. By 2020, China and the United States were at loggerheads and in the midst of a trade war.

Twenty years from now, Chinese leader Xi Jinping might still be in power in some fashion even into his 90s; Deng Xiaoping, China's paramount leader from 1978 to 1989, retained considerable influence

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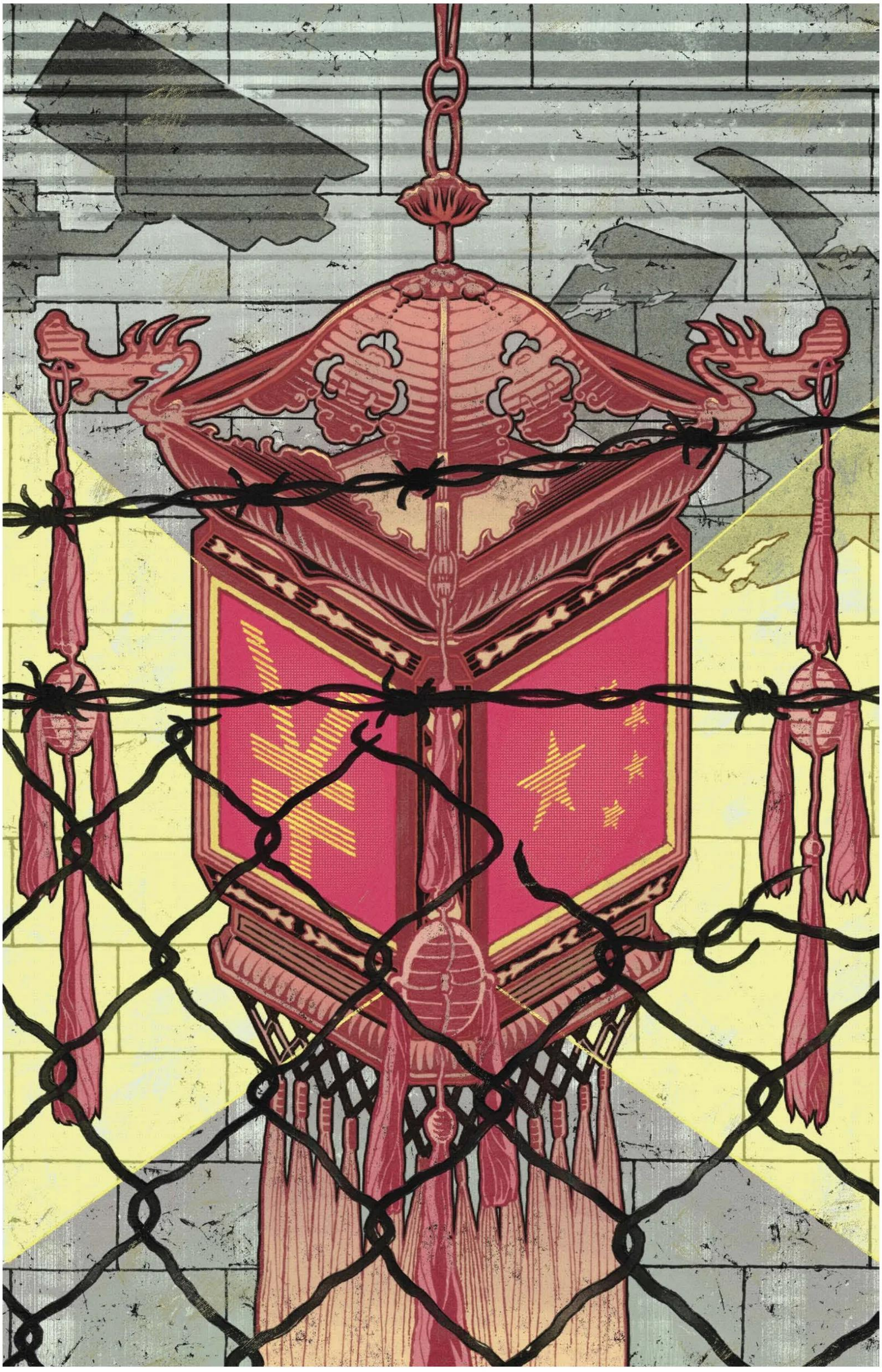

Illustration by Yiran Jia

until his death at 92, in 1997. Since taking the reins in 2012, Xi has pushed China in directions that have increasingly placed it at odds with its neighbors, regional powers, and the United States. At home, authorities are widening and deepening systems of surveillance and control, clamping down on ethnic minorities and narrowing the space for dissent. On its maritime borders, China engages in ever more confrontational acts that risk sparking conflicts not just with Taiwan but also with Japan and Southeast Asian countries. Farther afield, Beijing has tacitly supported Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and is widely believed to be responsible for major cyber-interference in Western infrastructure. This trend is hardly promising, and things could get even worse were China to take the bold step of starting a war over Taiwan, an operation for which the Chinese military has long been preparing.

And yet another China remains possible—one that would allow a degree of coexistence with the United States and its allies and partners without requiring the sacrifice of essential global interests or values. To be sure, China may never become the kind of country many Western optimists imagined in the early post–Cold War decades: a gradually more liberal and obliging member of the U.S.-led international order. That horse bolted the stable long ago. But in 20 years, a version of China could emerge with which the West and the wider world can coexist, as long as both China and Western governments avoid the policies that would make conflict inescapable.

That coexistence would not be especially warm, but it would have shed the kind of friction and animosity that loom over relations today. The generation of Chinese leaders after Xi, many of whom came of age during the modest openings of the 1980s, 1990s, and the first decade of this century, might well want to return the country to the promise of those periods. They may also realize that entanglement in any significant military or geoeconomic confrontation will prevent China from achieving its other aims, such as reviving the economy to achieve middle-class growth at home and spread the country's influence abroad. Beijing cannot wage a big war and still attain economic security. Its aging society and the imperatives of greater regional economic integration to sustain its growth make it harder to endure the consequences of a major conflict—or even just a more confrontational regional and global posture.

But even if China avoids triggering immense conflicts with its neighbors and the West in the near future, it will not simply become

a placid member of a steadily eroding liberal international order. Its global influence could grow significantly, in ways that will cause Western countries and liberal democracies considerable angst. The United States and its allies, however, will have to determine whether a China that is a softer incarnation of its current self should be regarded as a legitimate part of a changing global order—or still be treated as an existential threat.

THE RETURN OF THE QING

To understand where China might be going, it's worth examining a much older pattern that underpins Chinese foreign policy. When the Qing dynasty, which ruled China from 1644 to 1912, had to grapple with European imperial powers in the late nineteenth century, prominent officials crafted two slogans that defined how China should deal with the Western challenge: *fuguo qiangbing*, or "rich country and strong army," and *zhongti xiyong*, or "Chinese for essence, Western for usage." The ideas behind these phrases have remained constant across the century and a half since they first came to prominence during the late imperial decline of the Qing.

The first drew from famous rhetoric during China's Warring States period over two thousand years ago. The slogan distilled the country's abiding material ambitions, its need to attain power through militarized national security and prosperity. In the last century, other great powers have deprioritized the quest for military strength, whether because of defeat in war (as was the case with Germany and Japan) or imperial decline (as with the United Kingdom, which went from being a great power at the start of the twentieth century to a middle power by its end). China has not.

The second phrase denoted the idea that a non-Western country could adopt some of the frameworks of Western modernity—such as particular kinds of military technology or constitutional and legal reforms—without sacrificing its authentic cultural self. In 1865, Qing officials discussed the opening in Shanghai of the Jiangnan arsenal, China's first modern weapons factory, in this language. Many non-Western societies embraced similar views, including Japan, a country that modernized rapidly in the twentieth century to compete with Western states while still retaining a distinct sense of its own identity. The challenge they set for themselves was to achieve material progress and improve state capacity without becoming "Western."

The Qing dynasty ended, but the debate about how to achieve these two national goals did not. The Chinese Communist Party always believed that forging a militarily strong and economically secure China was one of its fundamental objectives. By the 1990s, the CCP wondered whether it should follow the model of Singapore: a country that won global admiration while producing stable governance, a balance between consensus and coercion, and the ostensible adherence to what its longtime leader Lee Kuan Yew called the "Asian values" of deference to authority and communitarianism.

In 20 years, a version of China could emerge with which the West can coexist.

The dual aspirations of these slogans are visible today. China has long wanted to become a wealthy and strong country, but only in the present has it come close to achieving this goal; it now has the world's second-biggest economy and its second-biggest military. Becoming a great power has coincided with the need to underline the indigenous sources of Chinese greatness. Since at least the 1980s, the CCP has nurtured a modernized, authoritarian version of Confucian culture, stressing the importance of "harmony" in public life, a quality very much at odds with the churning revolution of Mao's rule from 1949 until his death in 1976. Under Xi, significant resources have been poured into initiatives such as the Confucian canon project, which reached a 20-year milestone in 2023 by classifying over 200 million characters' worth of texts from China's cultural traditions.

The core aim of *fuguo qiangbing*, of becoming wealthy and militarily strong, will define Chinese policy in the years and decades to come. But it could prove tricky for Beijing to attain. Unlike in the imperial age of the nineteenth century, the assertion of military strength in the interconnected twenty-first century can jeopardize the search for prosperity. Precisely because China is not an old-style empire, its growth largely depends on its expansion of supply chains, its investments in other countries, and its unceasing quest to embed itself in new markets. That economic ambition can easily be undone if China engages in alarming military actions. Irredentist adventurism, notably in pursuit of territorial claims in Taiwan, the South China Sea, and along the disputed border with India, could make current and potential partners wonder whether they can truly rely on China.

China may well become more confrontational in its approach to the world. Appeals to economic rationality won't convince nationalists in the party or on social media who want to see the country assert itself on the international stage. But if China uses force to transform its regional geography, it will change the way that others see it. China might argue that its ambitions are limited, that Taiwan or the South China Sea are exceptions to its general policy of nonconfrontation. But neighbors would find it harder to trust a China that chooses to define its own boundaries and fails to demonstrate any constraints on its own power. China would not be isolated, but it would struggle to build trust and encourage other governments to accept the norms it wants to define the world: untrammeled state power and the subordination of civil rights and freedoms to economic and development goals.

DIRE STRAITS

China would struggle even more to chart a better path were it to choose to wage a war over Taiwan. Such a war would be motivated, in China, by a politics of identity that is largely impervious to economic rationality and other strategic considerations. Still, such a war would create a lose-lose scenario for everyone.

A violent seizure of Taiwan would be hard to accomplish, but China could probably pull it off. The aftermath of such aggression, however, would be deeply damaging for Beijing. The use of military force and the human and economic cost of violence would make all of Asia nervous about Chinese intentions regarding regional maritime routes and provoke many of these countries to ramp up security measures and reject opportunities for greater regional integration. Asian states will worry that China might decide—much as Russia has done since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022—that some countries are more sovereign than others and that the domestic actions and preferences of neighboring states can somehow constitute a violation of sovereignty. Chinese officials may reject comparisons with Russian actions in Ukraine or the U.S. invasion of Iraq, but decision-makers in Southeast Asia will find it difficult to trust Beijing.

Even if the seizure of Taiwan does not lead to a wider regional confrontation, any number of powerful economic actors in the global North might impose sanctions that would hurt China, and Asia more broadly. Beijing's ideological coercion or "reeducation" of a conquered island under a regime like that in place in Xinjiang or Tibet would

destroy the high-tech, export-oriented economy of the island, which is highly dependent on extensive interactions with the wider world.

The conquest of Taiwan would also deal a huge blow to Chinese soft power. In Asia, the story would take hold that Beijing was never able to peacefully persuade its compatriots to join a greater China. A China that can't convince a culturally similar territory to join it will struggle to persuade others that it can create a meaningful wider "community of common destiny," to use CCP terminology. In the region, East Asian and Southeast Asian countries would divert spending away from consumption to building up their militaries, and they would seek to disentangle their supply chains from China.

This post-conflict version of China would become increasingly ostracized. Sanctions from wealthy countries would disrupt the Chinese economy over the medium to long term. Russia was able to turn to China to limit the damage of sanctions after it launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but China will not have any similar benefactor to provide new, lucrative supply chains or markets, even if it retains its access to much of the global South. Countries in wartime conditions that are cut off even partially from global flows often suffer significant inflation, as Russia has seen since 2022. Chinese policymakers in the 1990s who rejected the "shock therapy" visited on post-Soviet Russia remembered that hyperinflation under the predecessor Nationalist regime had helped usher in a Communist victory in 1949. In the 1980s, even more modest inflation of 20 to 30 percent led to widespread demonstrations and ultimately fueled the political protests that ended bloodily in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. Were Beijing to attack Taiwan, it would risk another devastating inflationary period, with similar effects on social stability.

China will not abandon its claim to Taiwan, as Xi's 2025 New Year message showed when he declared that "no one can stop the historical trend of national reunification." The CCP's close control over media and propaganda, however, means that it could easily choose to deprioritize the quest for unification. That action alone would have tremendous benefits for Beijing. Taiwan is important to Chinese citizens, but they care more about day-to-day issues such as the stability of the economy and jobs. Xi has built up forces on the mainland across from the island and ratcheted up rhetoric targeting Taipei. But China would bolster trust in its position in the region if it toned down its rhetoric and actions related to Taiwan and its maritime claims in the South China

Sea, making it clear that these issues can be resolved at some point in the future. Lowering the temperature would go some way toward removing one of the most powerful causes for concern in the wider world about Chinese intentions.

GENERATIONAL SHIFT

Under Xi, China has become more authoritarian in its control of its citizens, more confrontational in its conduct with its neighbors, and more open in its desire to challenge U.S. supremacy. The next generation of Chinese leaders may pull the country in a different direction. In 20 years, the CCP officials now in their 40s will form the bulk of the leadership. Xi could still be in charge, but he will be in his early 90s and likely the only remaining leader whose teenage years were shaped by the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, an experience that seems to have given him an abiding desire for order above all. Instead, the remaining top leaders will be those who grew up in the 1990s and in the first decade of this century. The China of their youth was one where Chinese broadcasting and the press were significantly more open than they are now, where daring journalism was sometimes possible, and where there were still real debates about how China could reform its political system. Those who came of age in the early twenty-first century also experienced a decade of relatively free discussion on social media until that, too, was suppressed.

Just as the Cultural Revolution shaped the very top leaders today, the memories of a more open China will be powerful among leaders in the coming decades—not just high party officials but also figures in business, media, and the parastatal organizations, such as the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, that substitute for civil society. Many of these leaders won't be liberal in the Western sense of that term; if the wider world expects committed Americanophiles in the Chinese leadership, it will wait in vain. But some are likely to be far more open-minded than they would admit in public today. Indeed, in private, many people in the business, media, and think-tank worlds are frustrated with and despondent about the atmosphere in China. Like their elders, they will remain wary of the United States, but they may not, for instance, be as interested in partnering with Russia, a country they regard as offering no serious economic opportunities. Xi's father loved Russia because of its cultural and political influence on the revolution that would drive the Communists to power in China

in 1949, and many Chinese citizens today tolerate Russia because it is vigorously anti-Western. But the public does not have a strong bond with the country. One 2024 survey suggested that around 120,000 Chinese are learning Russian; over 300 million are learning English.

The transfer of power to this *jiulinghou* (post-1990s) generation could encourage decision-makers in China to recognize that less is more. The country need not change its goals in the coming decades: it will still want to be a global power with a strong army and to see the world in the communitarian, authoritarian terms that suit the CCP. But future leaders may see value in moderating China's authoritarianism in ways that would make it more powerful. Beijing's attempts to expand its influence have been damaged by its encroachment on others and its lack of transparency and prickliness in international diplomacy. In contrast, countries such as India, Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates have taken pains to project themselves as cooperative actors on the international stage even when their internal politics have moved in illiberal directions. These countries have frequently pursued goals not aligned with those of Western countries, such as India's purchase of Russian oil and weapons, but the perception that they do not seek to reshape the world order to suit themselves has in fact magnified their influence.

Future Chinese leaders could well be nostalgic for the China of the late 1990s that was able to create a more favorable, global image for itself after the disaster of Tiananmen Square. This China would still strive for prosperity and strength, but it would assume that relative openness to the world is the best way to get to prosperity and strength. Even as it eschews any aspiration to be Western, it would be keen to acknowledge that Chinese identity has always been pluralistic and draws on many external influences. At home, it would recognize that would-be totalitarian surveillance states are never guaranteed survival—see, for instance, East Germany. It would relax the kinds of controls and systems of surveillance and censorship that it is now tightening, not just with the hope of producing greater social harmony and stability but also presenting a China that is more appealing to the world.

A more moderate but still authoritarian China will not be the pluralist democratic country once dreamed of by Western politicians, such as U.S. President Bill Clinton, and senior CCP figures from earlier eras, such as former Politburo members Li Rui and Zhao Ziyang. But it may

be a realistic medium-term outcome. Such a China may also resemble much of the rest of the world, as the drift toward authoritarianism in global politics seems likely to continue into the 2030s and beyond. By that time, many countries in the West, never mind the rest of the world, may have adopted more illiberal policies at home, restricting personal freedoms and the movement of people. Few countries, not even the United States, will be in a rush to advance a global campaign for liberal democracy in the years to come. In that environment, a China under less sharp-edged leadership could very well seem more compatible with the future international system. A more illiberal global atmosphere, ironically, could allow China to loosen up in areas in which doing so might expand its global influence and in which it no longer feels vulnerable to liberal counterattacks.

A TALE TO TELL

In this scenario, China would still need to overcome immense global skepticism about its intentions. A 2023 Pew survey across a variety of countries concluded that, despite international concerns about U.S. interference, impressions of the United States were still much more favorable than those of China. During the Cold War, the United States managed to create a persuasive vision of itself as a leader of a liberal world order that ultimately triumphed over a rival Soviet order. China will need to conjure something similarly attractive if it wants to cement its global power and economic and political preeminence. It will want the world, particularly the countries of the global South, to see it as an economically robust and militarily strong country, one that remains rooted in its own core cultural identity while also serving as an exemplar for other societies seeking prosperity in difficult circumstances.

It would not be necessary for all of China's ideological messages to be comprehensible across different cultures and societies. After all, it's often said that the United States has a story that can resonate far beyond its shores, and that story helps create the country's soft power, but in reality, the United States sells a highly particular version of itself abroad. Many aspects of American life—for instance, the view held by many Americans that freedom and the right to bear firearms are inextricable—do not resonate outside the United States. China's internal debates, such as arguments about whether Communists or Nationalists were more instrumental in the defeat of Japan in World War II or reformulations of Marxist-Leninist

theory (Xi calls himself a "twenty-first-century Marxist"), are of little interest to those outside the country. But China can still offer a vision of itself that appeals to the outside world.

There is a precedent. Modern China has produced a global ideology in the recent past: Maoism. It's often forgotten how influential this strand of thinking was just over half a century ago. In India, in Peru, and on the streets of Paris, different rebel groups found the package of convictions that went under Mao's name to be a potent source of ideological power. Many of the specifics of Mao's thought were geared toward China's own realities of peasant revolution and the search for a post-Qing political settlement. But Maoism seemed to fit a 1960s moment, when wealthy and developing countries alike were exploding in revolution against their existing systems. The vision of youthful rebellion against a calcified, aging system and of a revolutionary future anchored in the countryside offered more than enough for people outside China to use for their own purposes.

Of course, in the decades to come, China will not export a violent revolutionary cult. Instead, Beijing could succeed by offering a plausible story about itself in the turbulent 2030s, when liberal pluralist democracy may well have become a minority taste. By then, the majority of global political regimes could range from hybrid illiberal democracies to authoritarian states. As a stable, economically productive, and technologically innovative polity, China could comfort and even inspire elites and ordinary people in other countries. It already does so. As much as many Indians mistrust China's intentions, for instance, many Indian political and business elites evince increasingly open admiration for the Chinese system and its undeniable material achievements. In selling its example and worldview, China could draw on Confucian ideas, including the notion that collective values are more meritorious than individualistic ones. China could champion "authoritarian welfarism," in which governments combine coercive top-down control with significant social spending to provide public goods and reduce inequality—and in so doing, highlight the perceived failures of liberal free-market capitalism. Versions of this politics have already gained adherents in the United States, Europe, and Latin America in the past decade, as liberal individualism has been increasingly called into question. China could make the case that the endpoint for a prosperous and stable society looks like what is on offer in Beijing rather than in Paris and New York.

China can give substance to its global appeal by concentrating on one key issue, the green energy transition, portraying itself as a leader when the United States has turned in another direction. In 20 years, China could reach the apex of its current strategy of becoming the world's dominant player in facilitating the transition by continuing to export electric vehicles and the components to make green energy more widely available and by increasingly shifting to cleaner sources of energy production at home. By providing global public goods, it can link the values of collective striving embedded in "authoritarian welfarism" with the moral imperatives of energy transition. If the West is split, with Europe more interested in green technology than a United States still significantly committed to fossil fuels, China will find it easier to make pragmatic clean energy partnerships with European states. China would be both an exemplar and a provider for growing, energy-hungry countries elsewhere, too, especially those that are particularly vulnerable to climate change. China will find it much easier than liberal Western states to speak to the needs of people in large countries susceptible to mounting environmental disasters, such as Indonesia, Nigeria, and Pakistan, whose large populations have rising consumer demands. It can frame its green offerings not just as a matter of practical necessity but also of justice, supplying what the Western countries principally responsible for this crisis cannot.

> By the 2030s, liberal pluralist democracy may be a minority taste.

But to cast itself as such a savior, China will need to create a society that is at least broadly prosperous and stable and whose large armed forces are capable but seldom stray from the barracks or port. That sort of China could promote the idea that the country has a unique system of political and economic thinking and strategy (*zhongti*, "Chinese for essence") that nonetheless can be used elsewhere by those who care to learn from it. As China courts middle powers with this narrative, the West could find it hard to push back.

China could also emerge as a hub for new technology by the 2030s, with considerable autonomy from the United States, should the trend toward technological and trade "decoupling" continue. Fewer Chinese young people will likely be studying in the West, and the already small number of Westerners who do so in China will remain limited. China and the United States will likely grow further apart as their ecologies of technology diverge further over time.

But even as China's scientific development in fields such as artificial intelligence becomes more distinct from that of Western countries, tech developers and entrepreneurs will want to participate in both spheres. By the 2030s, technological norms might meet and compete in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and South America, sometimes forming hybrid tech cultures that mix elements from China and the West. China will seek to draw more people into its tech orbit. Chinese universities and research institutes will host a growing number of students and researchers from Southeast Asia and beyond. Some of the most creative scientific work might well happen in third countries, where researchers and entrepreneurs are freer to mix and match what they learn. Decoupling, which would force scientific research and development into separate silos, would be bad for the Western and Chinese science bases but might be the making of several emerging middle powers.

CHINA IN THE CRYSTAL BALL

In 20 years, China could be a very different geopolitical actor than it is now. It could have moderated its authoritarianism, possess but not use military force, and be constrained as well as enabled by its major trade and technology links. This China would still be a country whose norms are different from those of the ever-shrinking liberal world, and its capabilities would still undoubtedly make neighbors and rivals nervous. But Western countries would find such a China manageable and also harder to posit as an existential geopolitical rival.

To reach that point, China will have to change. It will need to convince other countries that it does not seek to resolve issues through confrontation, whether through conventional military means or the use of cybertechnology. It will have to wean itself from its tendency to switch between saccharine rhetoric about its own place in the global order and, on the other hand, harsh screeds and coercive trade and military tactics when countries don't fall in line. Such rhetoric works in the closed media environment at home: it has little global appeal, even among countries that profess some sympathy with China's worldview.

Change is inevitable in China over the next 20 years, but external factors will likely be secondary in shaping that change. Instead, long-term domestic trends will define China's future. These include the country's need to care for an older and sicker population, the rise to maturity of a generation that did not grow up with the belief that the

United States is China's primary enemy, and the need to create stable higher-value jobs with a shrinking working-age population. The current downturn in domestic professional middle-class employment can be solved only by long-term solutions that involve China doing a lot more work to become a trusted and cooperative actor in the global economy.

China and the United States should both note that by the middle of the twenty-first century, the powers of the global South will be much stronger political, economic, and technological actors in their own right, not chess pieces in someone else's game. The wider world is unlikely to take the West's negative assessments of China as gospel; many outside the West will see the benefits of a China whose economic power, huge markets, and capacity to innovate in green energy and artificial intelligence is useful to them. But China's military buildups and mercantilist economics will rebound on the country, reminding its partners that they should not become dependent on Beijing. A version of China that the world, including the global South, can live with would not have to be democratic or liberal. But it would need to be one that acknowledges its own errors, is much more transparent, and understands that any use of military or other coercive force (including in cyberspace) will fundamentally damage trust in its international relations.

China may well succeed in fulfilling the paired aspirations of the Qing era, the quest for geopolitical and economic power, along with the retention of a fundamental "Chinese essence." But it will not do so if it chooses to start major military conflagrations in Asia. As long as a plausible case can be made that China is a military threat, Beijing gives the Western world an argument that can be used against it. By taking a less confrontational and militarist posture, however, China will give the West greater dilemmas to solve. Some Western countries may find Chinese-style welfarist authoritarianism attractive. Western policymakers and thinkers will have to determine whether a powerful state that is a geoeconomic and ideological challenge but not a military one still deserves to be treated as an existential danger.

A China that looks like the creator of a peaceful order in the 2040s will be much harder to argue against in the West and the wider world than its current confrontational incarnation. It is unclear whether China can really take that path. Still, over the past century, the least reliable way to predict what China will look like in 20 years has always been to extrapolate in a straight line from where it is now.

Underestimating China

Why America Needs a New Strategy of Allied Scale to Offset Beijing's Enduring Advantages

KURT M. CAMPBELL AND RUSH DOSHI

Success in great-power competition requires rigorous and unsentimental net assessment. Yet the American estimation of China has lurched from one extreme to the other. For decades, Americans registered blistering economic growth, dominance of international trade, and growing geopolitical ambition, and anticipated the day when China might overtake a strategically distracted and politically paralyzed United States; after the 2008 financial crisis, and then especially at the height of the COVID pandemic, many observers believed that day had come. But the pendulum swung to the other extreme only a few years later as China's abandonment of "zero COVID" failed to restore growth. Beijing was beset by ominous demographics, once unthinkable youth

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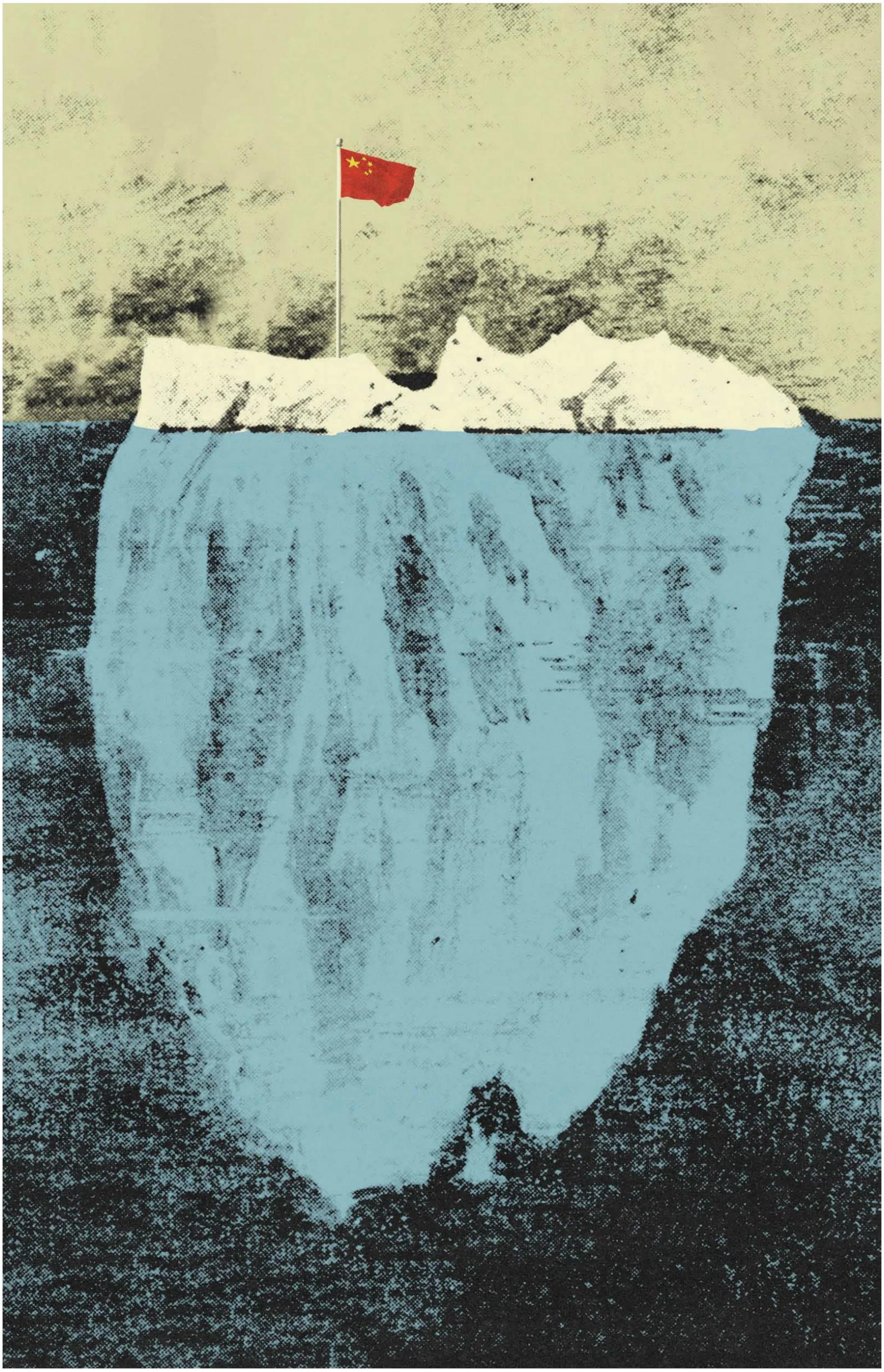

Illustration by Tyler Comrie

unemployment, and deepening stagnation while the United States was strengthening alliances, boasting breakthroughs in artificial intelligence and other technologies, and enjoying a booming economy with record low unemployment and record high stock markets.

A new consensus took hold: that an aging, slowing, and increasingly less nimble China would not overtake an ascendant United States. Washington shifted from pessimism to overconfidence. Yet just as past bouts of defeatism were misguided, so is today's triumphalism, which risks dangerously underestimating both the latent and actual power of the only competitor in a century whose GDP has surpassed 70 percent of that of the United States. On critical metrics, China has already outmatched the United States. Economically, it boasts twice the manufacturing capacity. Technologically, it dominates everything from electric vehicles to fourth-generation nuclear reactors and now produces more active patents and top-cited scientific publications annually. Militarily, it features the world's largest navy, bolstered by shipbuilding capacity 200 times as large as that of the United States; vastly greater missile stocks; and the world's most advanced hypersonic capabilities—all results of the fastest military modernization in history. Even if China's growth slows and its system falters, it will remain formidable strategically.

During the Cold War, Soviet leaders often made the point that "quantity has a quality all its own." As productivity equalizes, nations with larger populations, broader geographic reach, and greater economic heft scale up and dominate smaller first-movers. This dynamic has held throughout most of history. The United States benefited from it during the last century. It caught the tide of European industrialization, then leveraged its continental scale and larger population to outclass the United Kingdom, Germany and Japan, and ultimately the Soviet Union. Today, it is China that benefits from that dynamic and the United States is at risk of being overtaken technologically, deindustrialized economically, and defeated militarily by a rival with far greater size and productive capacity.

This is an era in which strategic advantage will once again accrue to those who can operate at scale. China possesses scale, and the United States does not—at least not by itself. Because its only viable path lies in coalition with others, Washington would be particularly unwise to go it alone in a complex global competition. By retreating to a sphere of influence in the Western hemisphere, the United States would cede the rest of the world to a globally engaged China.

Yet acknowledging the need for allies and partners should be the starting point, not an endpoint—because the United States' legacy approach to alliances will no longer suffice. That approach, rooted in Cold War–era assumptions and extended by inertia over eight decades, tended to view partners as dependents: recipients of protection rather than co-creators of power. They were often seen as helpful, but also as burdensome and even obstructive. That model is obsolete. To achieve scale, Washington must transform its alliance architecture from a collection of managed relationships to a platform for integrated and pooled capacity building across the military, economic, and technological domains. In practical terms, that might mean Japan and Korea help build American ships and Taiwan builds American semiconductor plants while the United States shares its best military technology with allies, and all come together to pool their markets behind a shared tariff or regulatory wall erected against China. This kind of coherent and interoperable bloc, with the United States at its core, would generate aggregate advantages that China cannot match alone.

But such an approach demands a fundamental reorientation, from command-and-control diplomacy to a new capacity-centric statecraft. This radical shift in how the United States builds and wields power is essential in a world where it no longer has the singular advantage of scale. As China plays for time and mass, the United States and its partners must play for cohesion and collective leverage. To repurpose the warning often attributed to Benjamin Franklin: we must hang together, or we will all hang separately.

FROM SIZE TO SCALE

Not every large country becomes a great power. Size refers to dimensions; scale is the ability to use size to generate efficiency and productivity and thereby outcompete rivals. Small states can become world-class by maximizing efficiency on a small foundation, but when large states run that playbook on a much larger foundation, they can remake the world. Broader internal markets can drive down costs, enabling companies to outcompete others around the world. Bigger populations create deeper pools of talent and research. Large states are less reliant on trade, which gives them greater resilience. And they can field larger militaries.

Small states have risen to power on first-mover advantages, often with the acquiescence or benign neglect of larger states. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the United Kingdom was able to dominate

the world with a first-mover advantage in industrialization. But that dominance was short-lived. Germany and the United States—thanks in part to the diffusion of British industrial methods—were able to achieve greater scale than a small island in the northwest corner of Europe. From 1870 to 1910, the British share of global manufacturing fell by half as the United States and Germany caught up and surpassed it. While the United Kingdom's steel production doubled, to 6.5 million tons, Germany's quintupled, to 12 million, and the United States' grew sixfold, to 23 million. Germany and the United States pushed the British out of major industries, leveraging their larger internal markets, resource bases, and talent pools to drive down marginal costs. That economic advantage translated into still greater military and technological advantage. Together, these trends led to the United Kingdom's gradual deindustrialization and eventual decline.

American observers tend to underestimate China's ability to innovate.

British leaders and strategists were aware of the problem. In the late nineteenth century, the British historian John Robert Seeley, in one of the most influential books of the era, worried about the emergence of "highly organized states on a yet larger scale," noting that as technology diffused, "Russia and the United States will surpass in power the states now called great as much as the great country-states of the sixteenth century surpassed Florence." Even before the collapse of the British Empire, he feared that the United Kingdom would be reduced "to the level of a purely European Power" such as Spain. Seeley was not alone in calling for his country to pursue the kind of scale and efficiency gains an island could not generate on its own, through "Greater Britain"—tighter integration with imperial holdings in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and southern Africa. But these efforts were delayed, inconsistently pursued, and ultimately a failure. The colonies went their own way, and the British never found scale.

When World War I broke out, London was fortunate to have a much more powerful ally in Washington—one with the scale to help win World War I. That scale was clear to rivals. Before the war, Hitler had observed that "The American Union . . . has created a power factor of such dimensions that it threatens to overthrow all previous state power rankings." Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto predicted that his country's forces would "run wild for the first six months or a year,

but I have utterly no confidence for the second and third years" because of the United States' manufacturing advantage. Italy's foreign minister also recognized that a protracted war favored the United States: "Who will have the most stamina? This is the way the question should be put." All the Axis powers feared U.S. industrial capacity. They understood that quantity was a quality of its own.

Today, that daunting scale and capacity belongs to China. American strategists must confront the risk that the United States could find itself in the position of the United Kingdom a century ago. The British experience offers both lessons and warnings: its effort at imperial integration was too little and too late. But the United States today can succeed where Britain failed, by harnessing allied and partner scale in new ways.

RISE AND FALL AND RISE

The starting point for that success must be accurate self-assessment. In recent years, the pages of *Foreign Affairs* have featured a slew of essays making the case that the United States has a clear and enduring advantage over China. Michael Beckley argues that "the Chinese economy is shrinking relative to that of the United States" and that "current trends are solidifying a unipolar world." Stephen Brooks and Ben Vagle claim that "the United States still has a commanding and durable advantage" that would give it significant economic leverage in a conflict. Jude Blanchette and Ryan Hass conclude that "the United States still has a vital edge over China in terms of economic dynamism, global influence, and technological innovation."

Predicting the rise or fall of great powers is always a fraught exercise, given inadequate information, the risks of bias, the long shadow of current events, and the challenge of sorting out which metrics matter most and in what time frame. American strategists previously swung from one extreme to another in their estimation of Japan and the Soviet Union. That same weakness has characterized net assessment of China and the United States.

There is no question that China faces significant problems: an aging society, towering debt, stagnating productivity, growing risks in its housing market, high youth unemployment, crackdowns on the private sector. But even grave macroeconomic challenges do not neatly translate to strategic disadvantage. Two facts can be true at the same time: that China is slowing economically and that it is becoming more formidable strategically. And Beijing might well address economic challenges with a

return to sound decision-making in the years ahead. Emphasizing China's weaknesses risks understating its scale and capacity on the metrics and time frame most relevant for great-power competition.

For example, the idea that the United States' economy will remain larger than China's—contrary to most expectations just a few years ago—is frequently offered as evidence of commanding U.S. advantage. But as the economist Noah Smith argues in his analysis of these GDP comparisons, "Americans should take little comfort in the fact that their total GDP at market exchange rates is outpacing China's." As exchange rates shift, so do comparisons of relative size, so that a 15 percent depreciation of the renminbi—as has occurred since its peak three years ago—would make the Chinese economy seem 15 percent smaller even if its output stayed the same. Accounting for purchasing power and local prices using the World Bank's methodology, although imperfect, reveals instead that China's economy surpassed the U.S. economy about a decade ago and is 25 percent larger today: roughly $30 trillion to the United States' $24 trillion. This purchasing power adjustment captures the real cost of the determinants of national power, including infrastructure investment, weapons systems, manufactured goods, and government personnel—key factors in sustaining long-term strategic advantage.

Using this approach, if one looks narrowly at goods rather than services, China's productive capacity is three times as large as that of the United States—a decisive advantage in military and technological competition—and exceeds that of the next nine countries combined. In the two decades after China joined the World Trade Organization, its share of global manufacturing quintupled to 30 percent while the U.S. share halved to roughly 15 percent; the United Nations has estimated that, by 2030, the imbalance will grow to 45 percent and 11 percent. China leads in many traditional industries—producing 20 times as much cement, 13 times as much steel, three times as many cars, and twice as much power as the United States—and increasingly in advanced sectors as well.

Although still catching up in fields such as biotechnology and aviation, which have been traditional U.S. strengths, China—thanks in part to ambitious industrial policy efforts such as Made in China 2025—produced almost half the world's chemicals, half the world's ships, more than two-thirds of electric vehicles, more than three-quarters of electric batteries, 80 percent of consumer drones, and 90 percent of solar panels and critical refined rare-earth minerals. And Beijing is

taking steps to ensure its dominance continues and expands: China was responsible for half of all industrial robot installations worldwide (seven times as many as the United States), and it is a decade ahead of anyone else in commercializing fourth-generation nuclear technology, with plans to build over 100 reactors in 20 years. The last great power to so thoroughly dominate global production was the United States, from the 1870s to the 1940s.

American observers tend to underestimate China's ability to innovate, mistakenly assuming it simply copies and reproduces Western innovations. Like the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and the United States before it, China's manufacturing strength creates a foundation for innovative advantage. State investment helps, too; it now rivals the United States' investment in science. And China's large population provides a deep talent pool and competitive scale. In ten industries of the future, according to a recent report from the Information Technology and Industry Foundation, China is near the leading edge of innovation (or better) in six.

This industrial and innovative strength can be activated for military purposes. China's navy, already the largest in the world, will add a staggering 65 vessels in just five years, reaching a total size 50 percent larger than the U.S. Navy—roughly 435 vessels to 300. It has rapidly increased its ships' firepower, surging from one-tenth of the United States' vertical launch system cells a decade ago to likely exceeding U.S. capacity by 2027. Although China lags the United States in aviation, it has broken a long-standing technical barrier by building jet engines at home and is now rapidly closing the production gap, with the ability to build more than 100 fourth-generation combat aircraft annually. In most missile technologies, China is probably the world's leader: it boasts the first antiship ballistic missile, impressive air-to-air missile range, and the largest stockpile of conventional cruise and ballistic missiles. And in a growing number of military fields, from quantum communications to hypersonics, China is ahead of any competitor. These advantages, built over decades, will persist even if China stagnates.

KNOW YOUR RIVAL

China's challenges are significant. But their strategic importance is often overstated. For example, its demographic challenges will be a major issue in the long term, but in the medium term—a timeline much more relevant to competition with the United States—they are

manageable. A generational "echo boom," as the grandchildren of the Mao-era baby boomer generation enter the workforce, means that, despite an aging population, the percentage of the population below the age of 15 has actually increased, by over 30 million between the 2010 and 2020 censuses, and it has also grown as a percentage of the total population. China's dependency ratio (of adult workers to children and retirees) will remain below Japan's current ratio until 2050. And massive investments in education, industrial robotics, and embodied artificial intelligence will help China weather labor shortfalls.

Debt levels are also illustrative. Although China's household, corporate, and government debt is at a record 300 percent of GDP, other powers—including India, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States—have similar levels of total debt. In some cases, metrics that indicate weakness in one area reflect strategic strengths in another. China's housing bust, for example, is a drag on growth. But Beijing is plowing credit from that sector into industrial policy efforts that are boosting competitiveness. Similarly, while American firms continue to capture a higher share of profits and dominate rankings of market capitalization, Chinese firms are focused on different goals, often running losses to gain market share and put rivals out of business. Despite short-term challenges, China continues to play the long game.

Even if its weaknesses prove more severe than projected, China will remain vastly more powerful than any past U.S. competitor on the metrics most relevant for competition. Washington may have overestimated past rivals, including Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union. But China is the first to outmatch the United States in size alone, as well as in several strategically relevant areas. Stagnant or not, Beijing will remain more formidable than any past challenger.

Some analysts warn that American declinism is itself a risk, which could become "a self-fulfilling prophecy." There is wisdom in that admonition; the rise and fall of great powers often begins with flawed self-diagnosis. But it is also the case, as the political scientist Samuel Huntington argued in these pages before the fall of the Soviet Union, that fretting about decline can just as often drive renewal. The greatest risk is not declinism; it is complacency, leading to a lack of strategic intention and a failure to catalyze collective action to rise to the China challenge. If anything, the United States—particularly in the era of President Donald Trump—risks overestimating unilateral power and underestimating China's ability to counter it.

CAPACITY-CENTRIC STATECRAFT

For Washington, three realities must be central to any serious strategy for long-term competition. First, scale is essential. Second, China's scale is unlike anything the United States has ever faced, and Beijing's challenges will not fundamentally change that on any relevant timeline. And third, a new approach to alliances is the only viable way the United States can build sufficient scale of its own. Altogether, this means that Washington needs its allies and partners in ways that it did not in the past. They are not tripwires, distant protectorates, vassals, or markers of status, but providers of capacity needed to achieve great-power scale. For the first time since the end of World War II, the United States' alliances are not about projecting power, but about preserving it.

During the Cold War, the United States and its allies outclassed the Soviet Union. Today, a slightly expanded configuration would handily outclass China. Together, Australia, Canada, India, Japan, Korea, Mexico, New Zealand, the United States, and the European Union have a combined economy of $60 trillion to China's $18 trillion, an amount more than three times as large as China's at market exchange rates and still more than twice as large adjusting for purchasing power. It would account for roughly half of all global manufacturing (to China's roughly one-third) and for far more active patents and top-cited journal articles than China does. It would account for $1.5 trillion in annual defense spending, roughly twice China's. And it would displace China as the top trading partner of almost all states. (China is today the top trading partner of 120 states.)

In raw terms, this alignment of democracies and market economies outscales China across nearly every dimension. Yet unless its power is coordinated, its advantages will remain largely theoretical. Accordingly, unlocking the potential of this coalition should be the central task of American statecraft in this century. And that cannot be done by simply doubling down on the traditional alliance playbook.

The starting point for the United States can be long-standing bilateral alliances (such as those with Japan and South Korea) and multilateral alliances (such as NATO), along with newer partnerships (such as the AUKUS defense technology agreement with Australia and the United Kingdom) and less institutionalized groupings (such as the Quad, which also includes Australia, India, and Japan). But rather than simply celebrating these frameworks or expanding their membership, the task ahead is to deepen their function—to make them foundations

for capacity-centric statecraft across multiple domains. These relationships have too often operated on the assumption that the United States provides security while others contribute political support or, at best, niche capabilities. It has been largely security-centric, too—focused on deterrence, access, and reassurance—while leaving economic coordination, industrial integration, and technological collaboration as emerging but still secondary concerns. The traditional model was simply not designed to compete with a systemic rival on the order of China. It is dangerously inadequate to the demands of the moment.

The U.S. approach to alliances and partnerships in recent decades has been shaped by a combination of strategic habit and structural hierarchy. Now, it must become a platform for generating shared capacity across all critical domains—not just military ones. That will require a level of coordination and codependence that is unfamiliar and will at times be uncomfortable for both the United States and its partners. For military power, creating scale requires capacity to flow in both directions, including investment in the weaker parts of the U.S. defense industry and more generous provision of advanced U.S. military technologies to allies who historically have not received it. For the economy, scale means building a shared tariff and regulatory wall against China's excess capacity while constructing new mechanisms to coordinate industrial policy and pool allied market share. For technology, the challenge will similarly be to erect common investment rules, export controls, and research protections to prevent technology transfer to China while undertaking joint investment. These steps mark the difference between a coalition that is aligned in principle and one that is fused in practice. That shift—toward shared capacity as the foundation of strategy—will allow the United States and its partners to compete at scale and at speed.

SCALE BOTH WAYS

The Biden administration used existing security alliances and partnerships to construct a "latticework" meant to better distribute force posture, increase allied defense spending, and launch new security arrangements such as AUKUS while elevating bodies such as the Quad. These efforts should be reinforced, but the next step is to transform defense-industrial cooperation. The lessons from Ukraine are clear: the United States would lack sufficient capacity to sustain a prolonged conflict with China on its own. Although innovation from new firms in uncrewed systems is prom-

ising, true scale, particularly in legacy systems, will require co-production and deeper industrial integration with allies. The World War II Arsenal of Democracy is unlikely to return. In its place, the United States needs to construct what the historian Arthur Herman has called an Arsenal of Democracies: a networked defense industrial base built on joint production, shared innovation, and integrated supply chains.

This marks a sharp change from the past, when the United States primarily provided capability to others. Now, scale demands two-way flows, including allied investment and manufacturing in the United States. Some initial steps the Biden administration took, such as having the Japanese repair American destroyers, provide a modest glimpse of what is possible. More ambitious efforts might involve joint ventures with Japanese and South Korean shipbuilders (which are two to three times more productive than U.S. firms); partnerships between Europe's missile manufacturers and U.S. companies; or recruiting Japanese or Taiwanese firms to build legacy microelectronics in the United States. Too often, dated regulatory and political constraints, which must be addressed jointly by Congress and the executive, create barriers to benefiting from allied capability.

> The rise and fall of great powers often begins with flawed self-diagnosis.

The United States' own capability must also flow outward to allies. Biden-era efforts such as AUKUS and the co-production of Tomahawk missiles with Japan are steps in the right direction. But real progress requires overcoming a bureaucratic alliance between a State Department concerned about proliferation and a Defense Department fearful of eroding its edge. Sharing technology quickly is the key to ensuring that Australia builds nuclear submarines, that Asian allies have sufficient antiship cruise missiles and ballistic missiles, that Taiwan can deter Chinese invasion, and that India is able to turn the Andaman Islands to its east into a fortress that Beijing cannot ignore. In practice, this could mean harmonizing export-control laws, aligning procurement standards, and coordinating investment in chokepoint components, from semiconductors to optical equipment.

Allies can also transfer capacity to each other, both within regions and between different ones. Some of this has begun to happen haltingly, but much more is possible. South Korean weapons can help Europe rearm and reindustrialize. French nuclear technology can support India's

submarine program. Norwegian and Swedish missiles can help Indonesia and Thailand defend their waters. Pooling capacity requires thinking across alliances, with the United States facilitating collective action.

Tighter integration also requires more burden sharing—and burden shifting. Even as allies and partners build bridges across continents, they must also play a bigger role in deterrence closer to home, with Europeans stepping up in Europe and Asians stepping up in Asia. That can be done in part by strengthening the security dimension of increasingly important groupings (the Quad or the trilateral relationship with Japan and Korea). But Washington also needs to strengthen coordination with allies for actual warfighting—through steps such as modernized joint command-and-control systems, new investments in interoperability, and more sophisticated joint exercises. That could include creating joint units with U.S. allies and partners, starting with ground-based antiaircraft and antiship missile battalions to be used in a crisis in the Indo-Pacific and later extending to more complex air and naval air formations. The United States should also reinforce extended deterrence by offering allies a greater say in nuclear command and control and the kinds of nuclear sharing arrangements that it pursued with European allies during the Cold War.

Globally, the United States could pursue a new version of U.S. President Richard Nixon's "Guam Doctrine," which devolved responsibilities to partners after the Vietnam War. That would empower regional states—what former Australian Prime Minister John Howard called "deputy sheriffs"—to take the lead on security challenges in their neighborhood: Australia in the Pacific islands, India in South Asia, Vietnam in continental Southeast Asia, Nigeria in Africa. In practical terms, the next time a South Asian country faces challenges, the United States would defer to India's judgment on what might serve regional stability or counter China's influence rather than seek to advance its own preferences.

COMMON MARKETS

The Biden administration took important steps in the economic and technology competition with China, with initiatives such as the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council, the U.S.-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology, and coordinated semiconductor export controls with Japan and the Netherlands. But withstanding China's excess capacity and retaining technological leadership will require more ambitious action, beyond what Washington has typically been willing to do.

China's nonmarket practices and sheer scale have overwhelmed the World Trade Organization and now pose an existential risk to the industrial base of the United States and its allies and partners. Attempting to act alone against this threat will mean failure: securing the U.S. market will do little good if China can still push U.S. companies out of partner markets, depriving them of the scale they need to remain competitive. Instead, the United States and its allies and partners must find scale together, through a defensive moat against Chinese exports. Building a protected common market could start with coordinated tariffs on Chinese goods. But because tariffs can be easy to circumvent, a better approach might be to use coordinated nontariff barriers, including regulatory tools. (The Biden administration used such barriers against digitally connected vehicles from China.) Such regulatory measures could be coordinated with partners relatively quickly and easily.

Another tool is "preferential plurilateralism"—selectively opening allied and partner markets while creating higher barriers for Chinese goods. This approach, broadly supported by figures across the political spectrum, from Robert Lighthizer, the U.S. trade representative during Trump's first term, to prominent Democratic legislators, echoes aspects of the early post–World War II trading system, which gave preferential treatment to members of the free world over autocratic rivals. If the era of free trade agreements is over for now, then sectoral agreements with allies could offer promising avenues for pooling markets while avoiding political sensitivities.

Coordinated industrial policy instruments would also be useful, such as a new international industrial investment bank that would make loans to firms in strategic sectors to diversify supply chains out of China, especially in key sectors such as medicine and critical minerals. And coordinated efforts to remove barriers to allied and partner investment could, for example, allow the bypass of national security review. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have invested heavily in industrial cooperation with the United States (over $300 billion during the Biden administration with continued growth under Trump). And despite a tendency to dismiss Europe as economically stagnant, it outproduces the United States in steel, cars, ships, and civil aircraft; claims a greater share of global manufacturing; and has a manufacturing workforce three times the size of that of the United States. Meanwhile, stronger connections between scientific ecosystems—with more cooperation

and people-to-people ties, along with common research protections—will help ensure that U.S. allies and partners can match China's scale.

Pooled market share would also create strategic leverage. A collective framework for economic defense—what some have called an "economic Article 5," drawing on NATO's mutual defense clause—is a long-overdue response to China's economic coercion. Such an agreement would trigger coordinated sanctions, export controls, or trade action if one of the group's members encountered economic pressure from Beijing. It would also function as a platform for deterring military aggression.

EXIT OR LOYALTY?

Trump has presented the United States' partners with hard choices and outright threats. Many may understandably be loath to further tie themselves to Washington any time soon. Trust, built over generations, is easily squandered.

Great powers often overestimate their influence over others. Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev did not believe his experiments in regional autonomy would result in the exit of Soviet republics from the Soviet Union. The Trump administration may not expect its belittling and coercion of allies to lead to a "Gorbachev moment," but key U.S. allies are already considering declaring "independence" from Washington—pursuing nuclear weapons, building new regional groupings, challenging the dollar's role. Some, spurred by domestic reactions to U.S. pressure, are contemplating moving closer to China, even at enormous peril to their industries or security. The United States risks fracturing the free world and closing its best path to scale.

Yet as Washington turns away from its coalition, China is constructing its own. Driven together by anti-Western grievance and their own parochial interests, China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia are creating substantial authoritarian scale. China has built Russia's defense industrial base, helped Iran provide Russia with one-way attack uncrewed aerial vehicles, and assented as North Korea has sent troops to fight in Europe. All four governments are working to erode U.S. sanctions and are engaged in diplomatic coordination, intelligence sharing, and military exercises. This is a unified challenge that requires a unified response.

As some in the United States talk about creating divisions among China's partners by executing a "reverse Kissinger" with Russia, Beijing is determined to exploit fissures in Western alliances, notably between the United States and Europe. The risk now is that Washington will

split from Europe while failing to split China and Russia. Efforts to build democratic capacity have been aided by China's own missteps in conducting confrontational "wolf warrior" diplomacy; the United States is now engaged in counterproductive diplomatic pugilism of its own, providing openings for China to play the role of reasonable partner. Washington will have better luck partnering with allies than with adversaries animated by deep anti-U.S. sentiment.

If the United States fails to pursue scale with others, or retreats to the Western hemisphere while undoing its alliances, the contest for the next century will be China's to lose. The United States, like the United Kingdom before it, will find itself diminished by a great power with unprecedented scale. It will encounter a world divided among multiple great powers, but with China the strongest among them and in some areas stronger than all of them. The result will be a United States that is weaker, poorer, and less influential—and a world in which China sets the rules.

Although a growing consensus has swung toward underestimating China's power and overstating America's resurgence, that thinking echoes past cycles of misjudgment. Rosy perspectives on America's trajectory risk fueling the kind of go-it-alone unilateralism that assumes, implicitly and increasingly explicitly, that American allies and partners are obsolete or overvalued when they are in fact the only path to scale against a formidable competitor. Success requires going much further and with greater ambition than the alliance-friendly policies of the previous Biden administration and rejecting outright the alienating, go-it-alone "America first" approach taking shape under Trump.

Such a commitment is not just a policy, but a signal of the capabilities of the United States, its allies, and partners. The Chinese Communist Party is inordinately focused on perceptions of American power, and a critical input in that equation is its estimation of Washington's ability to pull in the allies and partners that even Beijing openly admits are the United States' greatest advantage. Accordingly, the most effective U.S. strategy—the one that has most unsettled Beijing in recent years and can deter its adventurism in the future—is to build new, enduring, and robust capacities with these states. A sustained, bipartisan commitment to an upgraded alliance network, coupled with strategic cooperation in emerging fields, offers the best path forward to finding scale against the most formidable competitor the United States has ever encountered.

Order Without America

How the International System Can Survive a Hostile Washington

NGAIRE WOODS

In a remarkably short time, the second Trump administration has upended many of the precepts that have guided international order since the end of World War II. President Donald Trump has rapidly redefined the U.S. role in NATO while questioning U.S. defense guarantees to Europe and Japan and even intelligence sharing with its Five Eyes partners: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. At the United Nations, the United States has sided with Russia and other erstwhile adversaries, such as Belarus and North Korea, and against nearly all its traditional democratic allies. European officials, scrambling to react, have begun wondering whether they need to develop their own nuclear deterrents and whether Washington will continue to maintain U.S. troops on the continent.

Yet just as important as these security considerations is the administration's rejection of the treaties, organizations, and economic

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institutions that the United States has done so much to shape. On the first day of his second term, Trump issued executive orders to withdraw from the UN Paris climate accord and the World Health Organization and imposed a 90-day pause on all delivery of U.S. foreign aid. In early February, he ordered a sweeping 180-day review of all international organizations to which the United States belongs and "all conventions and treaties to which the United States is a party." And more aggressive moves may be coming: Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation's blueprint for the second Trump administration, which has anticipated many Trump policies, calls for a U.S. exit from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, cornerstones of global development and economic stability that the United States has for decades guided with a firm hand.

From all this it may be easy to conclude that the postwar order is falling apart. By renouncing U.S. leadership, the Trump administration appears to be marking the end of American primacy and benevolent hegemony. As the historian Robert Kagan and others have argued, in the absence of the American superpower, a chaotic jungle may emerge. Of course, it is possible that the Trump administration could use raw power to undermine global stability and enable the United States, China, Russia, and others to carve out their own spheres of influence. In such a world, wars might be more frequent, and previous close allies of the United States, whether in Europe or Asia, could be vulnerable to outright coercion. Yet it is not preordained that this kind of breakdown will occur. The old order may well be disappearing, but whether that leads to chaos and conflict also depends on the many other countries that have until now upheld the institutions on which it has rested.

There are many ways that interstate cooperation can continue to be effective without U.S. leadership and even act as a restraining force on unilateral moves by Washington. But for that to happen, core members of the postwar order, including European countries, Japan, and other partners in Asia and elsewhere, must preemptively join together to reinforce cooperation with one another. They cannot afford to wait and see, with the risk that some might peel away. The Trump administration is moving fast to reset what the United States wants and bypassing long-established multilateral arrangements to get it. Other countries must move just as fast to protect and build on those structures, which they will need now more than ever.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

In standard accounts of international relations, order requires a powerful hegemon that is prepared to use its dominant military and economic power to uphold the rules, norms, and institutions that govern interactions among states. This understanding—known as hegemonic stability theory—is often invoked to explain the breakdown of order in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, when no country was both willing and able to underwrite cooperation: the United Kingdom was willing and the United States was able, but neither was both. By contrast, after World War II, the United States, driven by the global threat of communism, had both the will and the capacity to enforce order. Applied to today's world, the theory suggests that a U.S. withdrawal from the international treaties and organizations it helped create would cause a collapse of order.

As the political scientist Robert Keohane pointed out in the 1980s, however, hegemonic stability theory looks only at the "supply side": the willingness of a powerful country to supply the conditions for cooperation. But the demand side matters, too. Many countries, including the vast majority that lack dominant power, support various forms of multilateral cooperation to secure their own interests. That demand exists because in a world rife with competition, uncertainty, and conflicts, most countries recognize that ad hoc deal-by-deal diplomacy is unlikely to succeed. Such deals will tend to favor strong powers and thus lead to the kind of coercive behavior Trump has already used against weaker countries such as Canada and Mexico. As a result, even in the absence of a hegemon, countries may seek collective institutions to pool their power, build a bulwark against instability, and capture the mutual gains that occur when a modicum of cooperation is achieved. This insight suggests new possibilities for order without the United States.

In fact, multilateralism without a hegemon has a long history in Europe. At the Congress of Vienna in 1814–15, the European powers convened to create a rudimentary order. What emerged was the Concert of Europe, a group that would come to include Austria, France, Prussia, Russia, and the United Kingdom. Although the United Kingdom had great naval and economic strength at the time, it did not have hegemonic power over the continent. Rather, a combination of diplomatic cooperation and a balance of power kept order until the Crimean War and the unifications of Germany

and Italy disrupted it. A yet older example of such cooperation is the Hanseatic League, the confederation established by northern European cities in the thirteenth century to protect and promote their trading interests. Highly successful, it flourished for hundreds of years.

Since World War II, although Washington has occupied a hegemonic role in the overall order, there have been several prominent examples of demand-driven cooperation among groups of countries that do not include the United States. Take the European Union. Even in the face of U.S. apprehensions about protectionism, European countries successfully organized their economies as one large, powerful bloc. As a result, Europe has strong and durable institutions, including collective financial resources, such as the European Central Bank and the European Investment Bank, which now have major influence in international affairs. And as European countries scale up public investment to respond to the world's overlapping crises amid volatile changes in American foreign and trade policy, the euro could provide an attractive alternative to the U.S. dollar as a global reserve currency.

> Multilateralism without a hegemon has a long history in Europe.

Another prominent example of interstate cooperation without a hegemon is the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, a group that includes the major oil producers of Africa and the Middle East, as well as Venezuela. Since its establishment in 1960, OPEC has suffered defections, internal price wars, and regular cheating on its quota limits, but it has nonetheless empowered a group of resource-rich countries without strong armies or diversified economies to sway global affairs and generate leverage in capitals around the world. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the group has successfully coordinated production quotas among its own members and the ten other countries that form OPEC+ to stabilize and sustain high oil prices, furnishing its members more than a trillion dollars in gross revenue.

A looser form of demand-driven multilateral organization is the BRICS+ group of countries. Founded in 2009 by Brazil, Russia, India, and China, BRIC (as it was known then) has since grown to ten members. Although some have dismissed it as an ineffectual attempt

to provide an alternative to Western-dominated international financial institutions, the group is held together by a shared interest in reducing risks. For example, many BRICS+ members worry that their reliance on the U.S. dollar and U.S.-led international institutions makes them vulnerable to coercion and sanctions. They have created institutions that they hope will make them more resilient, including the New Development Bank, which by the end of 2022 had approved more than $32.8 billion in loans for 96 projects in BRICS+ countries and other emerging economies.

Each of these cases illustrates that countries that have common interests or a need to protect themselves against shared risks can make effective arrangements on their own. If the Trump administration decides to withdraw from international institutions, renege on U.S. commitments, and ignore established norms of diplomacy, that does not mean that other countries cannot create and sustain frameworks for negotiation and agreement. Indeed, there are several pathways by which the world could transition from U.S.-led institutions, treaties, and alliances to ones shaped by other countries.

BUILD BANK BETTER

Among the most promising areas in which the rest of the world can sustain multilateral cooperation without the United States is international development. When the United States began erecting the postwar economic order at Bretton Woods in 1944, key pillars included the creation of the IMF and the World Bank and, subsequently, the designation of the U.S. dollar as the world's reserve currency. From then on, U.S. policy dominated both institutions and the way they managed economic crises. But the second Trump administration has already shown its hostility to many international institutions, and some policy analysts close to the president have called for a dramatic reduction of or even an end to U.S. support for the IMF and the World Bank.

If Washington takes such extreme steps, they need not lead to the collapse of economic order. On the contrary, these moves could provide a spur to other countries to rethink the institutional framework, either by remaking existing organizations or by finding alternatives to them. Consider the World Bank and its lending agencies, the International Development Association, which provides funds to the poorest countries, and the International Bank of Reconstruction

and Development, which provides loans and development policy advice to middle-income countries. The IDA's effectiveness is undisputed: it can sustain aid efforts at a fraction of what it would cost individual countries to do so alone. For every dollar a country puts in, the IDA is able to raise and lend nearly four dollars to countries most in need. The agency can achieve this multiplier effect because it fortifies countries' direct contributions with international capital market borrowing, repayments from past IDA loans, and profit transfers from the IBRD.

If the United States stopped funding the IDA, however, other donor countries would need to step up fast. In fact, there is a strong strategic incentive for them to do so. For years, the United States, as the largest single donor, has been able to tailor IDA lending to its own interests, supported by the U.S.-led power structure of the World Bank itself. But Washington's dominance of the IDA has long been disproportionate to its contributions. In the agency's last replenishment, agreed to in December 2021, the United States contributed a mere 14.89 percent of overall funding, only fractionally more than Japan, which accounted for 14.63 percent. By contrast, the countries of Europe, taken together, contributed more than 50 percent. Other important donors include China at 5.62 percent, Canada at 5.04 percent, and Saudi Arabia at 2.98 percent. If the United States ceased to contribute, other donors would have an opportunity to correct this imbalance and demand more of a direct say in how the agency spent its funds.

Of course, the United States will resist any loss of influence. The Trump administration may well try to ratchet up its control over both the IDA and the IBRD, even as it drastically decreases its own contributions. There is precedent for this: in the 1980s, the Reagan administration reduced U.S. funding to the United Nations, the IMF, and the World Bank while seeking greater control over them. Other countries failed to find an effective way to push back, and the result was yet greater U.S. influence. Similarly, the Trump administration will likely put enormous pressure on the head of each organization and perhaps even on the staff to do Washington's bidding. The World Bank has already had to warn some of its staff not to travel through the United States after two Colombian staff members had their diplomatic visas revoked and were denied entry into the country by U.S. immigration authorities, as the Trump

administration pressed the Colombian government to accept U.S. military flights carrying deportees.

Nonetheless, by acting together, other donor countries have significant leverage of their own. They must not automatically accept any new conditions imposed by the United States or leave the heads of these agencies to fend for themselves. Nor should they simply abandon the bank or let it wither. Instead, these countries must make clear to the Trump administration that the United States can either maintain its influence by contributing or lose it. And they have the tools to do so: according to World Bank rules, if one member fails to meet any of its obligations to the bank—even if it is the most powerful member—a simple majority of other countries, exercising a majority of the total voting power, can suspend that member. This rule has yet to be used.

In a world that depends less on the dollar, the United States has less influence.

More drastically, the United States could exit the World Bank entirely, as called for by Project 2025. European states, Japan, and other countries need to prepare for such an outcome now. According to the bank's founding charter, if the leading contributor to the bank decides to leave, the organization's headquarters must relocate to "the territory of the member holding the greatest number of shares." Most likely, this would mean moving the bank to Japan, a step that could set the stage for building a coalition of members more closely involved in decision-making. Under Japan's leadership, for example, the bank could establish a major branch of the IBRD in the territory of one of the bank's largest fee-paying middle-income clients, such as Brazil or India; it could also place a major branch of the IDA in Europe, where many of the agency's largest contributors are located, or in Africa, closer to its major borrowers. Likewise, China could host a major branch devoted, perhaps, to financing sustainable energy. It could sit alongside Beijing's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which already co-finances extensively with the World Bank.

In short, the inevitable shakeup of the World Bank that would result from a U.S. withdrawal could present an opportunity to strengthen the institution. By properly planning for this scenario, the World Bank's members can ensure that the bank continues

to function and that it sustains its multilateral character. Such a transformation could also become a template for how other international institutions can adapt to an order that is no longer led by the United States.

A FALTERING FUND?

Another major casualty of the Trump administration's rejection of multilateralism could be the IMF, but the challenges it faces are different from those of the World Bank. For decades, U.S. policy has dominated the IMF, which has provided a place to pool reserves and to manage economic crises in a coordinated way. So dominant was this system in the late twentieth century that by the end of the Cold War, an international monetary and financial order without the United States seemed almost unthinkable. But the world looks very different today, and it is not just the United States that has changed.

For now, the Trump administration seems unlikely to withdraw from the IMF, which does much to protect U.S. interests using other countries' charges and contributions. In 2023 alone, the United States reported unrealized gains from the IMF—the rise in value of U.S. shares in the fund—of $407 million. But the fund is not as important to other countries as it once was. If the Trump administration decided to reduce U.S. contributions to the IMF while exerting greater control, other members would not have to remain beholden to it. Instead, they could draw on and expand a number of emerging alternative structures that carry out many of the same functions as the IMF.

For one thing, many countries now have substantial foreign exchange reserves, which offer insurance against external shocks and can provide foreign currency to their own banks if they come under stress. By the end of 2018, total foreign currency reserves held globally had increased tenfold compared with 30 years earlier; two-thirds of those reserves were held by emerging and developing countries. Moreover, in building these reserves, many countries are relying less on the U.S. dollar. The proportion of foreign exchange reserves held in dollars has declined from around 71 percent in 1999 to 57 percent in 2024, as countries seek yields in easy-to-trade currencies such as the Australian dollar, the Canadian dollar, Chinese renminbi, South Korean won, the Singaporean dollar, and the Nordic currencies. The shift away from U.S. dollars could rapidly accelerate if the Trump administration acts on a trade policy document written

by the economist Stephen Miran shortly before he became a senior adviser to the president, which appears to endorse the idea of forcing foreigners to convert their five- and ten-year U.S. Treasury bonds to 100-year securities bearing low interest rates; or on White House adviser Robert Lighthizer's suggestion that the United States tax foreign purchases of U.S. treasuries. A world that depends less on the dollar and less on the IMF is a world in which a unilateralist United States will have less influence.

A second line of defense to a weakened IMF is the growing use of currency swap agreements. CSAs call directly on another country's central bank for assistance in the event of a crisis. By 2024, China's central bank had signed 40 bilateral swap agreements, 31 of which were in force with a total value of about $586 billion. Brazil signed swap agreements with Argentina, in 2008, worth $1.8 billion and with China, in 2013, worth $30 billion. India has concluded CSAs with more than 25 countries, in most cases prioritizing countries with which it runs a current account deficit. CSAs have often been precursors to broader agreements among countries. Since their introduction in 2009, China's swap lines with Argentina have facilitated Chinese investment in Argentina's strategic infrastructure.

Equally important is the emergence of regional institutions that replicate many of the IMF's crisis-assistance roles. The Latin American Reserve Fund, or FLAR, evolved in the 1980s, offering financial support to countries in the region facing a balance-of-payments crisis. Similarly, in 2000, in the wake of the East Asian financial crisis, members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations came together with China, Japan, and South Korea to create a multilateral currency swap arrangement known as the Chiang Mai Initiative, which they have subsequently strengthened. A decade later, during the eurozone crisis, European countries established their own regional arrangement—what is now called the European Stability Mechanism. In 2014, BRICS created a Contingent Reserve Arrangement, which offers financial support in a crisis or anticipatory loans to avoid a crisis. And in 2025, the African Development Bank announced the creation of the African Financial Stability Mechanism to provide concessional refinancing—offering access to capital on favorable terms—to countries in crisis. Most of these arrangements have some link to the IMF, but each is also performing substantial forms of regional governance on its own.

SAFETY IN NUMBERS

In addition to upholding institutions that support economic order, countries can respond to a renegade hegemon by reshaping multilateral political forums. For decades, the United States has used a variety of groupings, including the G-7 and, in the twenty-first century, the G-20, to bring leaders together to shape collective responses to global problems. The G-7 emerged in the 1970s when the leaders of France, the United Kingdom, the United States, West Germany, and, subsequently, Canada, Japan, and representatives of EU institutions came together to manage new economic shocks. The broader G-20 emerged in 1999 and went on to play a key role in containing the 2008 financial crisis, orchestrating a global response and guiding the actions of various multilateral organizations to address the economic fallout. Overall, the G-7 and the G-20 have played key roles in forging mutual understanding and cooperative solutions.

But the Trump administration has expressed deep skepticism of both groups. In his previous term in office, Trump took the unprecedented step of refusing to join fellow G-7 leaders in the traditional joint communiqué issued at the end of a summit. Since returning to the White House, he has also directly contradicted other G-7 members by announcing a desire to bring Russia, a country that is under extensive Western sanctions for its aggression in Ukraine, back into the group. (Russia took part in G-7 meetings from 1998 until 2014, when G-7 members disinvited it because of its annexation of Crimea.) Trump has been equally critical of the G-20, refusing to send U.S. representatives to the G-20 meetings of foreign and finance ministers in Johannesburg in February 2025. In explanation, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio cited both the Trump administration's hostility to South Africa and a desire not to "coddle anti-Americanism."

With the United States increasingly absent, other countries must now step up to reshape these groups, including planning meetings potentially without the United States. In fact, the G-7 has often had a somewhat elastic membership, sometimes meeting in smaller groupings, as when five core members met in 1985 to sign the Plaza Accord to depreciate the U.S. dollar against other leading currencies, or inviting select guest countries to take part. Similarly, the G-20 has regularly invited additional attendees. This flexibility suggests a way forward if the United States withdraws or seeks to hobble these forums.

To be effective, a new group would need to include countries with substantial economic and/or military power, such as Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Members must also have a strong commitment to existing multilateral organizations, which would exclude Russia and the current U.S. administration. Of course, the exact membership would require careful consideration. The inclusion of China in particular would present a dilemma for countries that regard China as an adversary.

China has quietly increased its role in multilateral agencies.

As many countries see it, the growing contest between China and the United States is not only for control over markets and technology but also over who controls the rules of the game. The United States has enjoyed enormous influence over international rules and norms through its position in multilateral institutions. After all, it created these agencies after World War II with loyal junior partners in Japan, the United Kingdom, and Europe. China, by contrast, has had to build up its influence elsewhere through bilateral diplomacy and by setting up multilateral institutions of its own, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

But the Trump administration is now relinquishing its influence over the multilateral system, preferring instead to handle countries one by one, transaction by transaction. In so doing, it is thrusting China to the fore, and Beijing seems well prepared. It has quietly increased its role in multilateral agencies, becoming the third-largest shareholder in the IMF and the World Bank. And it has seized opportunities to publicly advocate for the World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization at a time when the United States has shown antagonism toward both. Like all powerful states, China relentlessly pursues its own national interests and participates in multilateral institutions as the best way to secure those interests in the long term. For other countries, this coincidence of self-interest and multilateralism—previously a defining characteristic of U.S. hegemony—is vital for sustaining international cooperation. Of course, it also raises the question of whether China in turn will become hegemonic. The answer to that will depend on how actively other countries press for and act on their own demands for cooperation.

Regardless of its exact membership, a new group would need to convene at speed. The United States is due to take over the leadership of the G-20 in December 2025, and other members cannot assume that the group will continue to function as it has in the past. Perhaps the longest-serving members of the original group—the governments of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—could consider convening a selection of members of the EU, the United Kingdom, and some members of BRICS+ in the intervening months, as a way of laying the groundwork for possible further shifts ahead.

BRAVE NEW ORDER

With the Trump administration's stark rejection of multilateral rules, norms, and institutions, the postwar order shaped by U.S. leadership is disappearing. But other countries do not have to be passive bystanders. European countries, Japan, and other major allies of the United States, along with potential new coalition partners, have several options. They can step up and replace the U.S. role in existing institutions, as in the case of the IDA and the World Bank. They can find alternative ways to perform some of the same functions when institutions become fundamentally weakened. And they can build new coalitions that are willing to sustain cooperation and support collective crisis management, creating what might now be a G-9 or G-12.

The institutional order that emerges from this upheaval will be unlike the U.S.-led one that has been in place for more than eight decades. There will be serious new risks, and the presence of a hegemon that has largely withdrawn from international arrangements will pose far-reaching challenges. But taken together, the broad group of countries that continue to support global institutions and multilateralism—a group that could span from Europe to much of Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East—will represent a large chunk of global GDP and will be backed by significant military power. And by rebuilding or recrafting the institutions that matter most, they can do much to maintain stability, address global problems, and protect their members against crises. If they do not, many countries may find themselves more exposed than ever, scrambling to protect narrow, short-term interests without leverage or influence in a more dangerous world.

The Post-Neoliberal Imperative

Contesting the Next Economic Paradigm

JENNIFER M. HARRIS

The United States is between scripts. For roughly four decades, the free-market ethos championed by President Ronald Reagan drove economic policy and pervaded American culture. A broad bipartisan consensus assured Americans that the markets knew best: they were not just efficient, but wise and fair. The state, the thinking went, should not encroach on the natural order produced by the churning of free-market forces. And the state did not. Between 1982 and 2015, the market capitalization of all publicly traded companies went from around 35 percent of GDP to roughly 95 percent. The private sector, under what many call "neoliberalism," boomed.

But starting roughly a decade ago, neoliberalism began to lose its hold over American life—and over policymakers in Washington. For many Americans, "globalization" has become a dirty word, a phenomenon blamed for ills as various as inequality, the loss of industrial jobs,

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the risky ballooning of the financial sector, and the rise of geopolitical adversaries. U.S. leaders have strikingly rejected the assumptions of prior decades. President Donald Trump, in his first term, launched a salvo against neoliberal certainties. He evinced little interest in social spending cuts, imposed tariffs on foes and friends alike, professed sympathy for organized labor, and claimed to protect U.S. companies and workers from foreign competition.

His successor, Joe Biden, broke from the conventional free-market tenets that had framed much of his own political career. He maintained many of Trump's tariffs on China. At home, Biden tried to build a new kind of American industrial policy, one that rested on the premise that the state can and must shape markets. He restored antitrust protections to their pre-Reagan era extent. And he billed himself the "most pro-union president in American history," becoming the first U.S. president to join a union strike when he walked the picket line with workers in Michigan in 2023. By his own account, he "came into office . . . to move [past] trickle-down economics and get rid of it for everyone."

To be sure, not everybody is reading from the same script yet. As much as Kamala Harris, Biden's vice president and anointed successor, embraced many of his economic ideas, her presidential campaign also distanced itself from many of them. She proposed a far lower tax hike on long-term stock market gains for the wealthiest Americans than did Biden and seemed ready to back away from Biden's more forceful antitrust policy. In his second term, Trump has ratcheted up the use of tariffs to a feverish degree, and some of his cabinet appointments suggest deepening sympathy for organized labor, industrial policy, and pre-Reagan antitrust measures. But in other areas, Trump's fiscal policy seems traditionally neoliberal. In its first months, for example, the Republican-controlled Congress looked eager to extend the tax cuts Trump introduced in his first term. Doing so would add between two to four trillion dollars to U.S. debt, depending on spending cuts, another typically neoliberal ambition.

But in the breathless politics of recent years, one can discern the outlines of a new brand of democratic capitalism embraced by leaders and thinkers across the political spectrum. Unimaginatively dubbed "post-neoliberalism" by many, it offers an array of ideas and policies geared toward addressing the power imbalances hardwired into markets, regaining some clarity over what markets can and cannot do, and, not least, revisiting whether present economic arrangements are fundamentally good for Americans and for American society.

Post-neoliberalism's proponents argue that markets tend to concentrate wealth and create power asymmetries. These imbalances create problems for individuals and for an economy as a whole, so it is government's job to correct them. Otherwise, these imbalances can thwart competition, and before long, capitalism slides into corporatism, the domination of the economy by a handful of powerful groups. States have to manage the economy and ensure that imbalances don't affect its proper functioning. Moreover, markets are not ends unto themselves, post-neoliberals say, but tools for societies to pursue worthy national aims.

Markets are not ends unto themselves.

This post-neoliberal script has adherents on both sides of the political aisle. That makes it different from past pendulum swings. Neoliberalism, and Keynesianism before it, were largely championed by one party in response to the practical challenges of their day. Franklin Roosevelt, a Democrat, ushered in Keynesianism, with its emphasis on state intervention to shore up aggregate demand, to solve the Great Depression and mobilize the country for war. The next Republican to enter the White House, Dwight Eisenhower, did not dramatically roll back Keynesian policies. Decades later, Reagan, a Republican, offered neoliberalism to salve the stagflation of the 1970s. The next Democrat to become president, Bill Clinton, won election in 1992 in part by stressing his adherence to Reagan's free-market dictums. In both cases, a set of ideas became so dominant that the opposing party eventually acceded to them as a matter of political necessity.

The emerging script, however, does not seem to be following this historical pattern. Parallel realignments on both the left and the right suggest the rise of what the *New York Times* journalist David Leonhardt has called "a new centrism" that recognizes "that neoliberalism failed to deliver." This new centrism unites the Democratic Senator Chris Murphy in Connecticut (a state heavily reliant on the financial sector) and the Democratic Congressman Ro Khanna in Silicon Valley with lawmakers from more purple Congressional districts—upstate New York's Pat Ryan and Pennsylvania's Chris Deluzio routinely issue calls to, in Deluzio's words, "break free from the wrong-for-decades zombie horde of neoliberal economists." Republican Senators such as Josh Hawley and Bernie Moreno claim to support labor and express wariness of free trade and concentrations of wealth. "The economic

system of the last 30 years, it's nothing sacred," Hawley has said. "It's not inevitable. It was a choice. And we have it in our power to choose differently now and for the better."

Public opinion surveys consistently bear out the popularity of many post-neoliberal positions, including on industrial policy, unions, and stronger antimonopoly and consumer protections. The economics profession itself is changing, too. The work of several recipients of recent Nobel Prizes for Economics, including last year's winners, focuses on how political power and market power shape macroeconomic outcomes.

The measure of any economic philosophy, post-neoliberalism included, lies in how well it addresses the major problems of the day. And across the gamut of these problems—the return of a peer adversary in China; the need for fairer, faster economic growth; flagging faith in democracy itself; and the urgency of a politically plausible route to decarbonizing—the still emerging post-neoliberal vision fares better than its predecessor. Reverting to the neoliberalism that helped create these problems is not an option. Moments of transition, however, are dangerous. Just as it was hardly clear that Keynesianism would win out over darker, more domineering alternatives in Europe, there are many possible versions of post-neoliberalism that could take hold, not all of them good. Much depends on how societies shape what comes after neoliberalism and how they navigate the turbulence along the way.

BALANCE AND BUILD

At any given time, societies dwell within intellectual constraints. These paradigms determine understandings of how economies function and the values they should serve, and they help define what governments should and should not do. The power of these ideas rests in how they become so taken for granted that they persist for long periods without challenge. Beliefs such as "the king is divine," for instance, ordered every aspect of political and economic life in many parts of the world for centuries.

These narratives are rarely right or wrong in a normative sense. They arise because they help solve pressing contemporaneous problems. As the problems evolve, however, these governing philosophies become less useful, making way for the next script. In many parts of the world, the radical belief in popular sovereignty undid the hold of the notion of the divine right of kings, just as expanding commerce created a wealthy merchant class eager for greater political say. In the nineteenth century, as the United States grappled with the Industrial Revolution and the

imperatives of westward expansion, it relinquished mercantilism for the broad permission structure of laissez-faire capitalism to keep pace with galloping technological progress and to settle the country's vast interior. That economic philosophy worked well enough until it didn't; the Great Depression and the mobilization for World War II required different ideas, an opening that Keynesianism filled for another three decades.

By the late 1970s, society again had new problems, including social unrest, energy shocks, and stagflation, which ushered in an embrace of free-market neoliberalism. Neoliberalism can be broadly defined as a deep confidence in the capacity of markets to allocate capital and a corresponding skepticism of government's ability to structure economies, with a tendency to favor deregulation, free trade, and unfettered movement of capital across borders. It spread across the West and, at least in the United States, performed well for a time—growth picked up, inflation came down. But eventually, neoliberal ideas, too, ran their course, proving unable to solve problems such as lagging growth and accelerating climate change, and creating and exacerbating others. From 1980 to the early 2020s, inequality in the United States soared, with the top one-thousandth of the population doubling its share of overall wealth, to around 14 percent. (The top one percent now holds roughly 30 percent of the country's wealth.) Manufacturing shrank from 22 percent to nine percent of nonfarm employment during that period. And these same policies not only hastened the rise of a peer adversary—China—but also left the United States highly dependent on Chinese wares.

The emerging post-neoliberal consensus rests on two ideas, what can be called the imperatives to "balance" and to "build." Those who believe that the U.S. economy needs greater "balance" observe that markets tend to concentrate imbalances in economic power. As asymmetries have grown—between the financial sector and the rest of the economy, between big corporations and their smaller competitors, and between China's state-driven economy and the more market-oriented economies of its trading partners—they have left consumers with fewer options, and workers with lower pay. Most people now have less control over their economic lives. At Amazon fulfillment centers, which employ the majority of the company's 1.5 million workers, vending machines are stocked not just with snacks but with painkillers. The grocery delivery firm Instacart recently unveiled an artificial-intelligence-enabled price-setting service for grocery stores, advertising the ability to set food prices for individual consumers based on their willingness to pay.

In aggregate, such imbalances eventually stunt innovation and an economy's growth. Post-neoliberals believe that it is the job of government to address these disparities, not least because they bleed into politics.

In policy terms, this quest for balance has led in various directions. It has reenergized support for organized labor and a more aggressive push for antitrust and consumer protection efforts. It has seeded more skepticism of free trade. And it has caused economists and policymakers alike to question the size of the financial sector in the real economy. For instance, across their terms, Trump and Biden both favored closing the carried-interest loophole central to the business models of hedge funds and private equity.

But simply balancing the existing economy isn't enough. Governments need to make their economies more productive to keep growing in the years ahead, figure out ways to decarbonize quickly and at scale, and contend with peer challengers, as the United States must do with China. Leaders cannot merely try to make the economy fairer than it is. They must be willing to build—to use the power and purse of the state to directly increase the supply of certain essentials such as housing, clean energy, and advanced computing. The state can return to the business of building again partly through more affirmative public investment and partly through breaking the chokepoints, including those imposed by government regulation, that make these goods too scarce and costly in

the first place. Government should be willing to reclaim its unique role in setting bold societal aims, while also taking seriously the risk of the "million-dollar toilet" problem—so named after a proposed public toilet in San Francisco in 2020 that, thanks to various well-intentioned regulations, was slated to cost $1.7 million and take more than two years to build.

Traditional markets operate well in many areas of the economy, including in the making of furniture, brewing of lattes, and provision of haircuts. But the experience of recent decades suggests that markets can miss some essentials. Only active government policy can properly organize and supplement markets in producing many things the country cannot do without—such as vaccines, a stable manufacturing base, quality housing, childcare, and a decarbonized economy.

Balancing the economy and building more are two sides of a single coin. Neither on its own can fully reckon with the country's urgent to-do list. Simply encouraging production will do little to address how billionaires and $1 trillion revenue companies use political clout to bend economic rules in their favor; addressing those distortions will not speed decarbonization or prepare the United States to compete with a geopolitical peer. A better capitalism must draw from both the impulse to balance and the impulse to build—and be willing to discard the neoliberal nostrums that see such concerted state action as anathema.

THE POST-NEOLIBERAL TURN

Even critics of the post-neoliberal turn in economics concede that some post-neoliberal fiscal policies, such as the Chips and Science Act, boosted national security by aiming to reduce dependence on China for semiconductors and speed decarbonization through the clean energy investments of the Inflation Reduction Act. But when it comes to delivering stronger, more broadly shared growth, skeptics accuse post-neoliberalism of falling "considerably short of its lofty goals," as the Harvard economist Jason Furman wrote in these pages in March. "Inflation, unemployment, interest rates, and government debt were all higher in 2024 than they were in 2019. From 2019 to 2023, inflation-adjusted household income fell, and the poverty rate rose." Such policy missteps, according to Furman, all stem from "a broader unwillingness to contend with tradeoffs."

But looking at the right benchmarks shows that post-neoliberal economic policy—evident to a large degree in the actions of the Biden administration—righted the ship and kept the country afloat

and sailing at a reasonable clip. Unemployment in 2022 and 2023 was marginally lower than in 2019, for example—no small feat given the COVID-19 pandemic that had transpired in the years between—and unemployment ticked up only in 2024, largely because of higher labor force participation. Inflation-adjusted household income by 2023 was only barely below 2019 levels. (Household income for 2024 is not yet available.) By the first half of 2024, inflation-adjusted wage growth outpaced the same period in 2019.

Perhaps the strongest indictment leveled at the Biden administration is that its COVID stabilization package, known as the American Rescue Plan, was too large. Furman points to various output models to show that a much smaller package could have stabilized the economy. But those same models significantly underestimated the need for stimulus in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. The Biden administration insisted that it would not make the mistake the Obama administration had by spending too modestly and that it regarded the harms of overshooting as preferable to the damage of undershooting. It was as clearly stated a tradeoff as one could conjure.

> The top one-thousandth of Americans holds 14 percent of the country's wealth.

It proved a good trade. Yes, overshooting contributed to inflation—but not much. Most estimates have found that all the demand-side policies made by Biden, Trump, and the Federal Reserve during the pandemic raised inflation only by about two percent on average. The Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, for example, determined that Biden's rescue package contributed just 0.6 percentage points to inflation across 2021 and 2022, the recent years of high inflation, which peaked at around seven percent (using the Federal Reserve's preferred measure of year-over-year personal consumption expenditures inflation). Inflation was overwhelmingly caused by supply-side shocks that were out of the administration's control. In the meantime, the United States returned to pre-pandemic levels of growth faster than other rich countries.

It also gained a strong labor market. From spring 2022 to 2024, the country enjoyed its longest stretch of unemployment rates below four percent in over 50 years. Employment of people between the ages of 25 and 54—known as "prime-age employment," a better metric of labor market strength than unemployment since it incorporates the labor force participation rate—was higher under Biden than under Trump.

For the architects of these Biden-era policies, including me, this was no small point. Drawing people into the labor market was seen as crucial to overcoming the sluggish aggregate demand and productivity of the years before COVID.

In the end, Biden's macroeconomic experiment helped the United States outpace all other G-7 nations in GDP growth, as well as pre-COVID projections. Inflation-adjusted wages went up and rose most for low-wage earners. According to research by the economists David Autor, Arindrajit Dube, and Annie McGrew, wages at the bottom rose so much that wage inequality shrank, undoing one-third of its rise since 1980. The past five years' economic track record has been far more good than bad.

Furman is quite right, however, to caution policymakers against reverting to conventional approaches and to call for a "renewal of economic policy thinking." U.S. macroeconomic policy must now shift to more aggressively tackling high prices. Here again, the task of keeping prices down is suited to post-neoliberal policies.

Not all kinds of inflation are the same. It is worth recovering the monetary policy tradition of distinguishing between supply-side and demand-side drivers of inflation. This distinction was standard practice among academics and Federal Reserve policymakers before the neoliberal economist Milton Friedman's insistence that "inflation is always and everywhere a monetary phenomenon." In Friedman's view, the source of inflation did not matter. All that was needed to address it was to constrict the money supply by raising interest rates.

Economic policymakers should instead isolate the causes of inflation and deal with them accordingly. Global inflation since 2021 has come primarily from supply-side inflationary forces—pandemic-induced supply chain bottlenecks, climate change–induced crop failures, transit routes blocked by geopolitical upheaval, and shortages of energy and housing. If anything, the world is likely in for more supply-side shocks. The standard method of dealing with inflation—raising interest rates—is at best irrelevant and in many cases actively counterproductive. Instead, governments should address root causes: they should build more buffer stocks to get ahead of crop failures, find ways to keep housing and energy costs from spiraling out of control, and tax companies' windfall profits to curb price gouging during emergencies.

The post-neoliberal economic experiments of the past few years in the United States yielded the strongest GDP and productivity growth of any G-7 country, the strongest labor market in decades, and striking

declines in inequality. This is good news, not least because the pressing tasks to come—notably tackling the ballooning costs of essentials such as health care, contending with supply-side inflation, and maximizing the net benefits of new technologies such as artificial intelligence—all require more post-neoliberal policy, not less.

NO FREE LUNCH

Nowhere is the break with neoliberalism clearer, or more bipartisan, than in foreign economic policy. China's trade surplus with the rest of the world reached nearly $1 trillion in 2024. This fact helps explain the strong bipartisan consensus, now entering its second decade, that unfettered free trade is not an obvious good. Both parties largely agree on the need to strengthen the country's economic and technological competitiveness with respect to China. And they worked together in laying the conceptual tracks to rid the United States of dependence on China for economically and strategically vital inputs, such as ingredients for many generic pharmaceuticals and rare-earth minerals for smartphones, and imposing many rounds of tariffs, export controls, and safeguards against economic coercion.

But significant fissures remain. Thus far, the second Trump administration has not clarified what vision its tsunami of tariffs on China is meant to advance, or how, if at all, allies fit in. In the view of the Biden administration, the challenges the United States faces—lagging growth, the hollowing out of its industrial base, inequality, damage to democracy, competition with China, and the need to decarbonize to combat climate change—are hardly unique to the United States. U.S. policymakers must construct answers that work for the United States, but not the United States alone.

"The new Washington consensus," as it became known—the Biden administration's offer to its friends, articulated over two major addresses in 2023 and 2024 by National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan—amounted to a major reorientation of U.S. foreign policy. The United States' investments in physical, technology, and energy infrastructure, Sullivan insisted, would create positive global spillovers. But Washington would still need its friends to join in, adopting their own versions of technology- and decarbonization-minded industrial policies.

In exchange, the United States would reconstitute its foreign policy to better help its partners. U.S. policymakers understood that many of their allies are not nearly as wealthy and able to match the kinds of investments

the Biden administration was making in industrial policy. But it could better support friends by supplying them with more nimble financing—be it through expanded World Bank lending, a more muscular U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (which finances new infrastructure projects around the world), a new U.S. sovereign wealth fund, or a new clean energy financing authority. This fiscal firepower would be developed alongside a new generation of multilateral arrangements, including a critical minerals club; a trade pact for clean steel and aluminum; a G-7 clean infrastructure financing entity to compete with Chinese overseas investments in infrastructure; and a common carbon border adjustment.

Fundamentalists rush in where liberals fear to tread.

A new global minimum tax would also generate badly needed revenue. More important, it would mark the world's first meaningful collective step toward taming financial globalization, which has freed capital to hopscotch across the world in a way that workers cannot. As capital grew light on its feet, companies squeezed labor by threatening to move abroad. After a few decades of gawking at the problem, Washington, under the Biden administration, rallied 139 countries to do something. The resulting agreement, which set a 15 percent minimum tax on multinational corporations, has been implemented by roughly 90 countries. It failed to gain Senator Joe Manchin's support during negotiations about the Inflation Reduction Act, however, preventing the United States from joining the pact—a position Trump has signaled he will maintain.

Alongside the global minimum tax, the Biden administration showed other signs of treating globalization not as an unalterable force of nature but as something shaped by policy choices. When autoworkers were organizing at Volkswagen and Mercedes plants in Tennessee and Alabama in June 2024, the White House warned Germany that German companies should not interfere with unionization votes in the United States. It brought new labor cases under the terms of the United States' trade pact with Mexico and Canada, alleging harms to Mexican workers in sectors such as telecommunications, steel, and food production. Although small and halting, these steps showed that governments can reassert democratic control over the forces of globalization, but only by cooperating with others.

Reorienting U.S. foreign policy in this way is a long-term project. Prospects for progress over the next four years are dim, but the Trump

administration might sustain momentum on at least some fronts. In his first term, Trump created the Development Finance Corporation. Through a mix of reforms and greater funding, he is now working to vastly increase its lending muscle. He is also considering standing up a sovereign wealth fund. Both entities are likely to invest in several areas of bipartisan interest—such as in enhancements to electric grids, in nuclear and geothermal power, and in critical minerals and battery supply chains. For all the chaos and strife of the tariffs in the opening act of his second term, Trump's U.S.-Canada-Mexico trade deal, which went into effect in 2020, and his negotiations with China during his first term indicate some ability not just to pick economic fights but to try to settle them.

The biggest drag on post-neoliberalism is the failure of ambition and imagination of its architects, including me. In 1944, a group of countries led by the United States established the Bretton Woods system, remaking in a single summer the entire global economic and financial architecture. Apart from developing the global minimum tax with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Biden administration opted against mounting confabs of the scale and significance of Bretton Woods. When the administration did make efforts toward a new generation of multilateral arrangements, such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and its Latin American counterpart, Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity, these were insufficient—not because they did not involve tariff reduction, as many of their critics argued, but because their obligations were mostly not binding and their incentive structures were weak. In other cases, such as the global minimum tax and the U.S.-EU Global Arrangement on Clean Steel and Aluminum, the problem was not so much insufficient ambition in the design, but that Washington was ultimately unwilling to jeopardize broader transatlantic relations to pressure Europe to sign on within the available political window. It turns out there are no free lunches in post-neoliberal economics, either. Real solutions, although cost-effective, still cost something.

ALL THAT MONEY CAN'T BUY

Perhaps the most important question about what should follow neoliberalism is one that societies have largely forgotten how to ask. Four decades of neoliberalism have so thoroughly taught policymakers that the role of government should be limited that public debates about the

economy are now constricted to discussions about growth and distribution—the overall size and proportionate slicing of the pie. But what of its contents? Governments should also concern themselves with encouraging the economic arrangements that best enable democratic self-governance and serve to buttress civic life.

In this sense, Biden's brand of post-neoliberalism fed the body but not the soul. It focused on material economic questions. It also warned of the dangers to democracy. But for the most part, these were separate endeavors. It never posed the question of what the good life is or sought to guarantee the economic necessities of shared self-rule—the collective participation of citizens in shaping their economic and political institutions rather than having those structures determined by markets or technocratic elites.

To ask this question is to dust off an age-old debate in American political thought—between liberalism (confusingly named since it draws adherents from across the political spectrum), which defines freedom more in individual terms as the capacity to choose one's own ends, and republicanism (distinct from the American political party), which suggests that freedom depends on sharing in self-government. The two are not inherently in tension; they have coexisted in different proportions throughout the country's history. In the mid-twentieth century, however, liberalism began to predominate to such an extent that republicanism, and its concern with the civic consequences of economic choices, largely faded from view.

The arrival of neoliberalism and its "markets know best" ethos proved a handy companion for liberalism's discomfort with adjudicating debates over the public good. It was much easier to outsource them to the market. Charles Schultze, who chaired the Council of Economic Advisors under President Jimmy Carter, celebrated this turn to the market as a source of comity: "Democratic majoritarian policies necessarily imply some minority who disapprove of each particular decision," he wrote in 1977. By contrast, "relationships in the market are a form of unanimous-consent arrangement," where "individuals can act voluntarily on the basis of mutual advantage."

But now, over 40 years later, the cost of leaving these questions to markets is clear. Americans have never had more choice—and they are miserable. They suffer from loneliness, addiction to opioids and to technology, and an acute vulnerability to conspiracy theories. The longing for what the philosopher Michael Sandel calls a "public life of

larger meaning" hasn't gone away, and that desire can find undesirable expressions in authoritarian populism or other forms of extremism. Fundamentalists rush in, Sandel warns, where liberals fear to tread.

Liberalism and republicanism, then, are perhaps more codependents than competitors. Liberalism without republicanism fails to deliver on its aims of bolstering individual choice. It leaves larger questions of meaning unanswered and allows authoritarians to propose their own solutions. It neglects the extent to which people want a say in shaping the economic forces over their lives. In short, bringing liberalism and republicanism back into closer balance may be the key to saving liberalism.

Some American politicians are attempting such a revival. In 2023, Murphy, the Democratic senator, called on his fellow leaders to return to square one: "What makes a good life, filled with purpose, meaning, and happiness? And what does government need to do—and not do—so that more people have access to this life?" Conservatives, such as Hawley, Senator Tom Cotton, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, have criticized surrendering civic reasoning to markets and called for a capitalism that enlists markets to serve families, not the other way around.

Just how this spirit becomes flesh isn't straightforward. Still, there are a few broad aims to consider, starting with giving people more say in the economic forces governing their lives. Legislation that would curb the power of both algorithmic pricing and addictive social media now sits before Congress. That would be a fine place to start.

INEVITABLE AND YET UNCERTAIN

One of the hallmarks of economic scripts, whether Keynesianism, neoliberalism, or the dawning post-neoliberalism, is that they tend to spread across the ideological spectrum such that they become synonymous with society's understanding of capitalism overall. In truth, capitalism leaves room for near-limitless permutations of forms of government action. Neoliberalism has no greater claim to the capitalist mantle than Keynesianism had before it or that neoliberalism's successor will have. Even so, what supplants neoliberalism could well prove darker than what it replaced.

But there is no going back, not to the heyday of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s or to some sepia-tinted vision of Roosevelt's Keynesianism. The best outcomes for the United States presume that Americans focus not on denying the coming economic dispensation but on shaping it.

The Age of Forever Wars

Why Military Strategy No Longer Delivers Victory

LAWRENCE D. FREEDMAN

In Operation Desert Storm, the 1991 campaign to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation, the United States and its coalition allies unleashed massive land, air, and sea power. It was over in a matter of weeks. The contrast between the United States' grueling and unsuccessful war in Vietnam and the Soviet Union's in Afghanistan could not have been more stark, and the speedy victory even led to talk of a new era of warfare—a so-called revolution in military affairs. From now on, the theory went, enemies would be defeated through speed and maneuver, with real-time intelligence provided by smart sensors guiding immediate attacks using smart weapons.

Those hopes proved short-lived. The West's counterinsurgency campaigns of the early decades of this century, which came to be labeled "forever wars," were not notable for their rapidity. Washington's military

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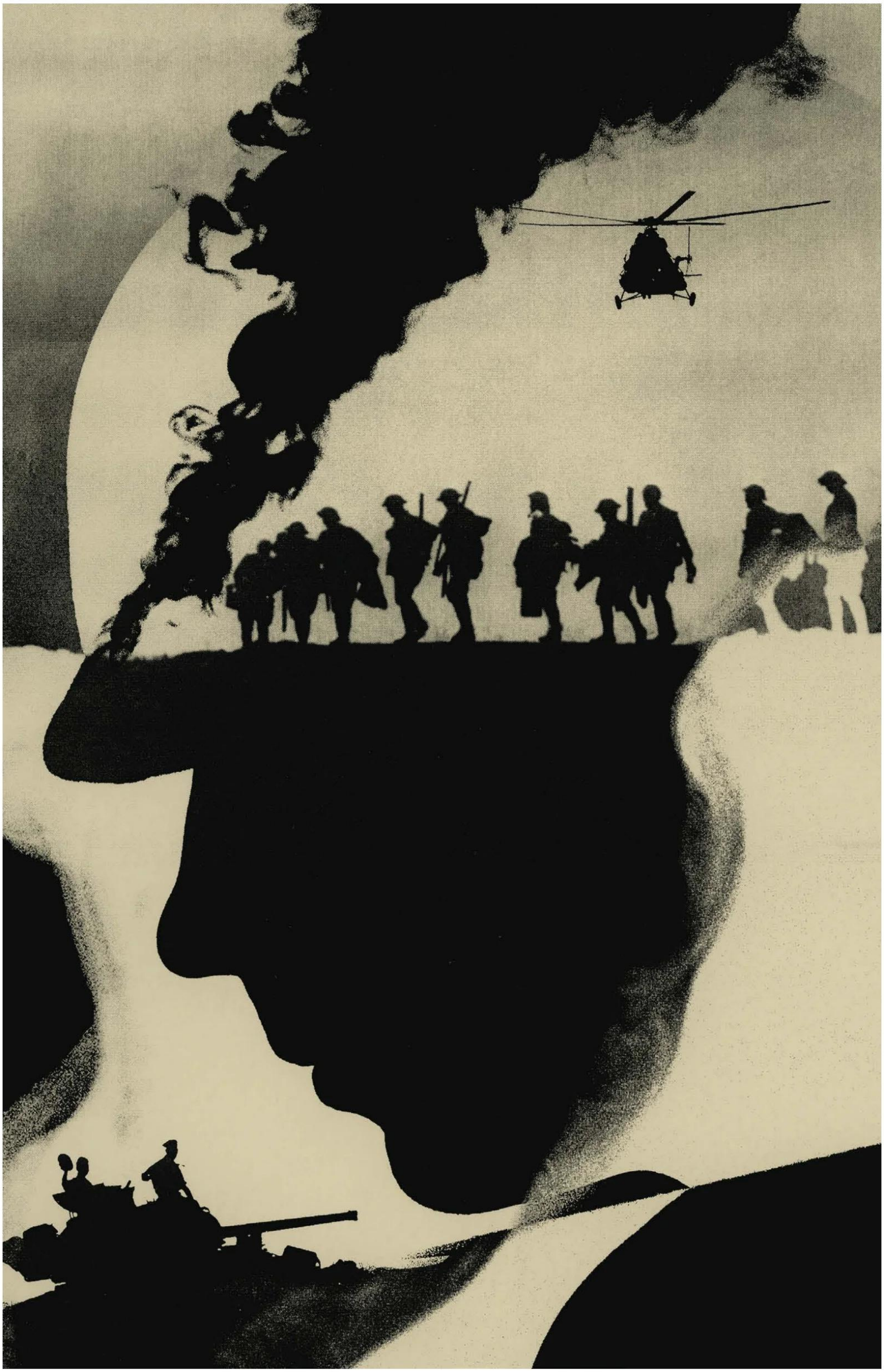

Illustration by Vartika Sharma

campaign in Afghanistan was the longest in U.S. history, and in the end it was unsuccessful: despite being pushed out at the start of the U.S. invasion, the Taliban eventually came back. Nor is this problem limited to the United States and its allies. In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine that was supposed to overrun the country in a matter of days. Now, even if a cease-fire can be reached, the war will have lasted for more than three years, during which it was dominated by grinding, attritional fighting rather than bold and audacious actions. Similarly, when Israel launched its invasion of Gaza in retaliation for Hamas's October 7, 2023, assault and hostage taking, U.S. President Joe Biden urged that the Israeli operation should be "swift, decisive, and overwhelming." Instead, it continued for 15 months, in the process expanding to other fronts in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, before a fragile cease-fire was reached in January 2025. By mid-March, the war had reignited. And this leaves out numerous conflicts in Africa, including in Sudan and the Sahel, that have no end in sight.

In both world wars, the key to victory was unbeatable stamina.

The idea that surprise offensives could produce decisive victories began to be embedded in military thinking in the nineteenth century. But again and again, forces that undertake them have shown how difficult it is to bring a war to an early and satisfactory conclusion. European military leaders were confident that the war that began in the summer of 1914 could be "over by Christmas"—a phrase that is still invoked whenever generals sound too optimistic; instead, the fighting would last until November 1918, concluding with fast offensives but only after years of devastating trench warfare along almost static frontlines. In 1940, Germany overran much of western Europe in a matter of weeks by means of a blitzkrieg, bringing together armor and airpower. But it could not finish the job, and after initial rapid advances against the Soviet Union in 1941, it was drawn into a brutal war with enormous casualties on both sides that would only end nearly four years later with the total collapse of the Third Reich. Similarly, the decision by Japan's military leadership to launch a surprise attack on the United States in December 1941 ended in the catastrophic defeat of the Japanese empire in August 1945. In both world wars, the key to victory was not so much military prowess as unbeatable stamina.

Yet despite this long history of protracted conflict, military strategists continue to shape their thinking around short wars, in which all

is supposed to be decided in the first days, or even hours, of combat. According to this model, strategies can still be devised that will leave the enemy surprised by the speed, direction, and ruthlessness of the initial attack. With the constant possibility that the United States could be drawn into a war with China over Taiwan, the viability of such strategies has become a pressing issue: Can China quickly seize the island, using lightning force, or will Taiwan, supported by the United States, be able to stop such an attack in its tracks?

What is clear is that amid rising tensions between the United States and a variety of antagonists, there is a critical misalignment in defense planning. In recognition of the tendency of wars to drag on, some strategists have begun to warn about the dangers of falling into the "short war" fallacy. By emphasizing short wars, strategists rely too much on initial battle plans that may not play out in practice—with bitter consequences. Andrew Krepinevich has argued that a protracted U.S. war with China would "involve kinds of warfare with which the belligerents have little experience" and that it could pose "the decisive military test of our time." Moreover, failure to prepare for long wars creates vulnerabilities of its own. To transition from a short war to a protracted one, countries must impose different demands on their military and on society as a whole. They also will need to reappraise their objectives and what they are prepared to commit to achieve them.

Once military planners accept that any major contemporary war might not end quickly, they are required to adopt a different mindset. Short wars are fought with whatever resources are available at the time; long wars require the development of capabilities that are geared to changing operational imperatives, as demonstrated by the continual transformation of drone warfare in Ukraine. Short wars may present only temporary disruptions to a country's economy and society and do not require extensive supply lines; long wars demand strategies for maintaining popular support, functioning economies, and secure ways to rearm, restock, and replenish troops. Long wars also require constant adaptation and evolution: the longer a conflict lasts, the more pressure there is for innovations in tactics and technologies that might yield a breakthrough. Even for a great power, failure to prepare for and then rise to meet these challenges could be disastrous.

Yet it is also fair to ask how realistic it is to plan for wars that do not have a clear endpoint. It is one thing to sustain a protracted counterinsurgency campaign but quite another to prepare for a conflict that

would involve continuing and substantial losses of people, equipment, and ammunition over an extended period. For defense strategists, there may also be significant obstacles to this kind of planning: the militaries they serve may lack the resources to prepare for a long war. The answer to this dilemma is not to prepare for wars of indefinite duration but to develop theories of victory that are realistic in their political objectives and flexible in how they might be achieved.

THE SHORT-WAR FALLACY

The advantages of short wars—immediate success at a tolerable cost—are so obvious that no case can be made for knowingly embarking on a long one. By contrast, even admitting the possibility that a war could become protracted may seem to betray doubts about the ability of one's military to triumph over an adversary. If strategists have little or no confidence that a prospective war can be kept short, then arguably the only prudent policy is not to fight it at all. Still, for a country such as the United States, it might not be possible to rule out a conflict with another great power of similar strength, even if rapid victory is not assured. Although Western leaders have an understandable aversion to intervening in civil wars, it is also possible that the actions of a nonstate adversary could become so persistent and harmful that direct action to deal with the threat becomes imperative, regardless of how long that may take.

This is why military strategists continue to shape their plans around short wars, even when a protracted conflict cannot be excluded. During the Cold War, the main reason the two sides did not devote extensive resources to preparing for a long war was the assumption that nuclear weapons would be used sooner rather than later. In the current era, that threat remains. But the prospect of a great-power conflict turning into something like the cataclysmic world wars of the last century is frightening—adding urgency to plans that are designed to produce a quick victory with conventional forces.

Strategies for carrying out this ideal type of war are geared above all toward moving fast, with some element of surprise and with sufficient force, to overwhelm enemies before they can mount an adequate response. New warfighting technologies tend to be assessed according to how much they might help achieve rapid battlefield success rather than how well they might help secure a durable peace. Take artificial intelligence. By harnessing AI, the thinking goes, militaries will be able to assess battlefield situations, identify options, and then choose and

implement those options in a matter of seconds. Vital decisions may soon be made so fast that those in charge, let alone the enemy, will barely appreciate what is happening.

So ingrained is the fixation with speed that generations of U.S. military commanders have learned to shudder at the mention of attritional warfare, embracing decisive maneuver as the route to quick victories. Long slogs of the sort now taking place in Ukraine—where both sides seek to degrade each other's capabilities, and progress is measured by body counts, destroyed equipment, and depleted stocks of ammunition—are not only dispiriting to the belligerent countries but also hugely time-consuming and expensive. In Ukraine, both sides have already expended extraordinary resources, and neither is close to anything that resembles a victory. Not all wars are conducted at such a high intensity as the Russian-Ukrainian war, but even prolonged irregular warfare can take a heavy toll, resulting in a growing sense of futility in addition to mounting costs.

Although it is known that audacious surprise attacks often deliver far less than promised and that it is much easier to start wars than to end them, strategists still worry that potential enemies may be more confident in their own plans for rapid victory and will act accordingly. This means that they are required to concentrate on the likely opening phase of war. It may be assumed, for example, that China has a strategy for taking Taiwan that aims to catch the United States unprepared, leaving Washington to respond in ways that either have no hope of success or are likely to make matters much worse. To anticipate such a surprise attack, U.S. strategists have devoted much time to assessing how the United States and other allies can help Taiwan thwart China's opening moves—as Ukraine did with Russia in February 2022—and then make it hard for China to sustain a complex operation some distance from the mainland. But even this scenario could easily lead to protraction: if the first countermoves by Taiwanese forces and their Western allies are successful, and China gets bogged down but does not withdraw, Taiwan and the United States would still face the problem of coping with a situation in which Chinese forces have a presence on the island. As Ukraine has learned, it is possible to get stuck in a protracted war because an incautious adversary has miscalculated the risks.

This is not to say that modern armed conflicts never end in quick victories. In June 1967, it took Israel less than a week to decisively vanquish a coalition of Arab states in the Six-Day War; three years later, when India intervened in the Bangladesh war for independence, it took Indian forces

just 13 days to defeat Pakistan. The United Kingdom's 1982 victory over Argentina in the Falklands War unfolded fairly quickly. But since the end of the Cold War, there have been many more wars in which early successes faltered, lost momentum, or didn't quite achieve enough, transforming the conflicts into something far more intractable.

Indeed, for some kinds of belligerents, the pervasive problem of long wars may provide an important advantage. Insurgents, terrorists, rebels, and secessionists may embark on their campaigns knowing that it will take time to undermine established power structures and assuming that they will simply outlast their more powerful enemies. A group that knows it is unlikely to triumph in a rapid confrontation may recognize that it has greater chances of success in a long and arduous struggle, as the enemy is worn down and loses morale. Thus, in the last century, anticolonial movements, and more recently, jihadist groups, embarked on decades-long wars not because of poor strategy but because they had no other choice. Especially when confronted by a military intervention from a powerful foreign army, the best option for such organizations is often to let the enemy tire of an inconclusive fight and then return when the time is right, as the Taliban have done in Afghanistan.

By contrast, great powers tend to assume that their significant military superiority will quickly overwhelm opponents. This overconfidence means that they fail to appreciate the limits of military power and so set objectives that can be achieved, if at all, only through a prolonged struggle. A larger problem is that by emphasizing immediate battlefield results, they may neglect the broader elements necessary for success, such as achieving the conditions for a durable peace, or effectively managing an occupied country in which a hostile regime has been toppled but a legitimate government has yet to be installed. In practice, therefore, the challenge is not simply planning for long wars rather than short ones but planning for wars that have a workable theory of victory with realistic objectives, however long they may take to realize.

NOT LOSING IS NOT WINNING

Effective warfighting strategy is a matter of not just military method but also political purpose. Evidently, military moves are more successful when combined with limited political ambition. The 1991 Gulf War succeeded because the George H. W. Bush administration aimed only to expel Iraq from Kuwait and not to overthrow Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine might have had more success

if it had concentrated on the Donbas rather than trying to take political control of the entire country.

With limited ambition, it is also easier to compromise. A workable theory of victory requires a strategy in which military and political objectives are aligned. It may be that the only way to resolve a dispute is through the total defeat of the enemy, in which case sufficient resources must be allocated to the task. At other times a military initiative may be taken in the firm expectation that it will lead to early negotiations. That was Argentina's view in April 1982 when it seized the Falkland Islands. When Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat ordered his armed forces to cross the Suez Canal in October 1973, he did so to create the conditions for direct talks with Israel. His armed forces were pushed back, but he got his political wish.

U.S. commanders shudder at the mention of attritional warfare.

Underestimating the enemy's political as well as military resources is one of the main reasons that short-war strategies fail. Argentina assumed that the United Kingdom would accept a fait accompli when it seized the Falklands and did not imagine that the British would send a task force to liberate the islands. Wars are often launched in the misguided belief that the population of the opposing power will soon buckle under an attack. Invaders may assume that a section of the population will embrace them, as could be seen in Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980 and, for that matter, in Iran's counterinvasion of Iraq. Russia based its full-scale attack on Ukraine on a similar misreading: it assumed there was a beleaguered minority—in this case, Russian speakers—who would welcome its forces; that the government in Kyiv lacked legitimacy and could easily be toppled; and that the West's promises of support to Ukraine would not amount to much. None of these assumptions survived the first days of the war.

When a short-war plan does not produce the anticipated victory, the challenge for military leaders is to achieve a new alignment between means and ends. By September 2022, President Vladimir Putin realized that Russia risked a humiliating defeat unless it could bring more soldiers to the front and put its economy on a comprehensive war footing. As the leader of an authoritarian state, Putin could quash domestic opposition and keep control of the media and did not have to worry too much about public opinion. Nonetheless, he needed a new narrative. Having asserted before the war that Ukraine was not a real country and that its "neo-Nazi"

leaders had seized power through a coup in 2014, he could not explain why the country failed to collapse when hit by a superior Russian force. So Putin changed his story: Ukraine, he alleged, was being used by NATO countries, in particular the United States and the United Kingdom, to pursue their own Russophobic objectives.

Despite having initially presented the invasion as a limited "special military operation," the Kremlin now portrayed it as an existential struggle. This meant that instead of simply stopping Ukraine from being so troublesome, Russia now sought to demonstrate to NATO countries that it could not be broken by economic sanctions or the alliance's weapons supplies to Ukraine. By describing the war as defensive, the Russian government was telling its people how much was at stake while also warning that they could not now expect a quick victory. Instead of scaling back its objectives to acknowledge the difficulties of defeating the Ukrainians in battle, the Kremlin scaled them up to justify the extra effort. By annexing four Ukrainian provinces in addition to Crimea, and by continuing to demand a supine government in Kyiv, Russia has made the war tougher, not easier, to end. This situation illustrates the difficulty of ending wars that are not going well: the possibility of failure often adds a political objective—the desire to avoid the appearance of weakness and incompetence. Reputational concerns were one reason why the U.S. government hung on in Vietnam long after it was clear that victory was out of reach.

Replacing a failed theory of victory with one that is more promising requires not only reappraising the enemy's actual strengths but also recognizing the flaws in the political assumptions that underlay the opening moves. Suppose that U.S. President Donald Trump's push for a cease-fire bears fruit, leaving the war frozen along current frontlines. Moscow could portray its territorial gains as a success of sorts, but it could not truly claim victory as long as Ukraine has a functioning independent and pro-Western government. If Ukraine temporarily accepted its territorial losses but could still build up its forces and obtain some form of security guarantees with the help of its Western partners, the outcome would still be a far cry from Russia's oft-stated demand for a demilitarized neutral Ukraine. Russia would be left administering and subsidizing wrecked territory with a resentful population while having to defend the long cease-fire lines.

Yet although Russia has not been able to win the war, so far it has not lost. It has been forced to withdraw from some territory conquered early in the war, but since late 2023 it has made slow but continued gains in the east. On the other hand, Ukraine has also not lost, for

it has successfully resisted Russian attempts at subjugation and has forced Russia to pay a heavy price for every square mile taken. Most important, it remains a functioning state.

NO END IN SIGHT

In commentary on contemporary warfare, the distinction between "winning" and "not losing" is vital yet hard to grasp. The difference is not intuitive because of the assumption that there will always be a victor in war and because, at any time, one side can appear to be winning even if it has not actually won. The situation of "not losing" is not quite captured by terms such as stalemate and deadlock since these imply little military movement. Both sides can be "not losing" when neither can impose a victory on the other, even if one or both are on occasion able to improve their positions. This is why proposals to end protracted wars normally take the form of calls for a cease-fire. The problem with cease-fires, however, is that the parties to the conflict tend to regard them as no more than pauses in the fighting. They may have little effect on the underlying disputes and may simply offer both sides the opportunity to recover and reconstitute for the next round. The cease-fire that ended the Korean War in 1953 has lasted for over 70 years, but the conflict remains unresolved and both sides continue to prepare for a future war.

Most models of warfare continue to assume the interaction between two regular armed forces. According to this framing, a decisive military victory comes when the enemy's forces can no longer function, and such an outcome should then translate into a political victory, as well, since the defeated side has little choice but to accept the victor's terms. After years of tension and intermittent fighting, one side may get into a position in which it can claim an unequivocal victory. One example is Azerbaijan's offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, possibly ending a three-decade war with Armenia.

Alternatively, even if a country's armed forces are still largely intact, pressures may build up on its government to find a way out of the conflict because of the cumulative human and economic costs. Or there may be no prospect of a true victory, as Serbia came to recognize in its war against NATO in Kosovo in 1999. When one of the parties to a conflict experiences regime change at home, that can also lead to the abrupt end of hostilities. When they do end, however, long wars are likely to leave legacies that are bitter and lasting.

Even in cases in which a political settlement, and not just a cease-fire, can be reached, a conflict may not be resolved. Territorial adjustments, and perhaps substantial economic and political concessions by the losing side, may produce resentment and a desire for redress among the defeated population. A defeated country may remain determined to find ways to recover what it has lost. This was France's position after forfeiting Alsace-Lorraine to Germany in 1871 after the Franco-Prussian War. In the Falklands War, Argentina claimed to be recovering territory it had lost a century and a half earlier. Moreover, for the victor, enemy territory that has been taken and annexed will still need to be governed and policed. If the population cannot be subdued, what may initially appear as a successful land grab may end up a volatile situation of terrorism and insurgency.

Contemporary conflicts often have blurred edges.

In contrast to standard models of war, in which hostilities usually have a clear starting point and an equally clear end date, contemporary conflicts often have blurred edges. They tend to pass through stages, which can include war and periods of relative calm. Take the United States' conflict with Iraq. In 1991, Iraqi forces were quickly defeated by a U.S.-led coalition, in what was ostensibly a short, decisive war. But because the United States decided not to occupy the country, the war left Saddam in charge, and his continuing defiance created a sense of unfinished business. In 2003, under President George W. Bush, the United States reinvaded Iraq and achieved another speedy victory, and this time Saddam's Baathist dictatorship was toppled. But the process of replacing it with something new precipitated years of devastating intercommunal violence that at times approached full-blown civil war. Some of that instability has continued to this day.

Because civil wars and counterinsurgency operations are fought in and among populations, civilians bear the brunt of the harm from these wars, not only by being caught up in deliberate sectarian violence or crossfire but also because they are forced to flee their homes. This is one reason why these wars tend to lead to prolonged conflict and chaos. Even when an intervening power decides to walk away, as both the Soviet Union and, much later, the U.S.-led coalition did in Afghanistan, it does not mean that conflict ends—only that it takes on new forms.

In 2001, the United States had a clear "short war" plan for overthrowing the Taliban, which it implemented successfully and relatively efficiently

using regular forces combined with the Afghan-led Northern Alliance. But there was no clear strategy for the next stage. The problems Washington faced were caused not by a stubborn opponent fighting with regular forces but by endemic violence, in which the threats were irregular and emerged out of civil society and in which any satisfactory outcome depended on the elusive goals of bringing decent governance and security to the population. Without external forces to prop up the government, the Taliban was able to return, and Afghanistan's history of conflict continued.

Israel's triumph in 1967—a paradigmatic case of quick victory—also left it occupying a large territory with resentful populations. It created the conditions for many wars that followed, including the Middle East wars that erupted with Hamas's October 7, 2023, attacks. Since then, Israel has fought campaigns against the group in the Gaza strip, from which Israel had withdrawn in 2005, and against Hezbollah in Lebanon, where Israel had fought a mismanaged operation in 1982. The two campaigns have taken similar forms, combining ground operations to destroy enemy facilities, including tunnel networks, with strikes against weapons stocks, rocket launchers, and enemy commanders. Both conflicts have caused huge numbers of civilian casualties and widespread destruction of civilian areas and infrastructure. Yet Lebanon could be considered a success because Hezbollah agreed to a cease-fire while the war in Gaza was still underway, which is something it had said it would refuse to do. By contrast, the short-lived cease-fire in Gaza was not a victory, because the Israeli government had set as its objective the complete elimination of Hamas, which it did not achieve. In March, after a breakdown of negotiations, Israel resumed the war, still without a clear strategy to bring the conflict to a definitive end. Although severely depleted, Hamas continues to function, and without an agreed plan for the future governance of Gaza or a viable Palestinian alternative, it will remain an influential movement.

In Africa, protracted conflicts appear endemic. Here the best predictor of future violence is past violence. Across the continent, civil wars flare and then abate. These often reflect deep ethnic and social cleavages, aggravated by external interventions, as well as cruder forms of power struggle. The underlying instability ensures constant conflict in which individuals and groups can have a stake, perhaps because the fighting provides both a stimulus to and a cover for trafficking in arms, people, and illicit goods. The current war in Sudan involves civil strife and shifting allegiances, in which one oppressive regime was toppled by a coalition, which then turned in on itself, leading to an even more vicious war. It also involves external actors

such as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, which are more concerned with preventing opponents from gaining an advantage than with ending the violence and creating the conditions for recovery and reconstruction.

Proving the rule, cease-fires and peace treaties, when they do occur, often turn out to be short-lived. Sudanese parties have signed more than 46 peace treaties since the country achieved independence in 1956. Wars tend to be identified when they boil over into direct military confrontation, but the pre- and postwar simmering is part of the same process. Rather than discrete events with a beginning, a middle, and an end, wars might be better understood as the result of poor and dysfunctional political relations that are difficult to manage by nonviolent means.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF DETERRENT

The main lesson the United States and its allies can draw from their considerable experience of lengthy wars is that they are best avoided. Should the United States become involved in a protracted great-power conflict, the country's whole economy and society will need to be put on a war footing. Even if such a war ends with something approximating a victory, the population would likely be shattered and the state drained of all spare capacity. Moreover, given the intensity of contemporary warfare, the speed of attrition, and the costs of modern weaponry, ramping up investment in new equipment and ammunition might still be insufficient to sustain a future war for long. At a minimum, the United States and its partners would need to procure sufficient stocks in advance to stay in the fight long enough for a much more drastic, full-scale mobilization to be set in motion.

And then, of course, there is the risk of nuclear war. At some point during a protracted war involving either Russia or China, the temptation to use nuclear weapons might prove irresistible. Such a scenario would probably bring a long conventional war to an abrupt conclusion. After seven decades of debate about nuclear strategy, a credible theory of nuclear victory over an adversary able to retaliate in kind has yet to be found. As with conventional war strategists, nuclear planners have focused on speed and brilliantly executed opening moves, with the aim of taking out the enemy's means of retaliation and eliminating its leadership, or at least alarming and confusing it to generate a paralysis of indecision. All such theories, however, have appeared to be unreliable and speculative since any first strikes would have to contend with the risk of an enemy launch on warning as well as sufficient systems surviving for a devastating

riposte. Fortunately, these theories have never been tested in practice. A nuclear offensive that does not produce immediate victory and instead results in more nuclear exchanges might not be protracted, but it would undoubtedly be bleak. This is why the condition has been described as one of "mutually assured destruction."

It is worth recalling that one reason the U.S. defense establishment embraced the nuclear age so enthusiastically was that it offered an alternative to the devastating world wars of the early twentieth century. Strategists were already keenly aware that fights to the finish between great powers could be exceptionally long, bloody, and costly. As with nuclear deterrence, however, great powers may now need to prepare more conspicuously for longer conventional wars than current plans assume—if only to help ensure that they don't happen. And as the war in Ukraine has painfully shown, great powers can be implicated in long wars even when they are not directly involved in the fighting. The United States and its allies will need to improve their defense industrial bases and build stocks to better prepare for these contingencies in the future.

The conceptual challenge this kind of preparation poses, however, is different from what would be required to prepare for a titanic confrontation between superpowers. Although the prospect may be unpalatable, military planners need to think about managing a conflict that risks protraction in the same way that they have thought about managing nuclear escalation. By preparing for protraction and reducing any potential aggressor's confidence in being able to wage a successful short war, defense strategists could provide another kind of deterrent: they would be warning adversaries that any victory, even if it could be achieved, would come with an unacceptably high cost to their military, economy, and society.

Wars start and end through political decisions. The political decision to initiate armed conflict is likely to assume a short war; the political decision to bring the fighting to an end will likely reflect the inescapable costs and consequences of a long war. For any military power, the prospect of drawn-out or unending hostilities and significant economic and political instability is a good reason to hesitate before embarking on a major war and to seek other means to achieve desired goals. But it also means that when wars cannot be avoided, their military and political objectives must be realistic and attainable and set in ways that can be achieved by the military resources available. One of the great allures of military power is that it promises to bring conflicts to a quick and decisive conclusion. In practice, it rarely does.

The Conventional Balance of Terror

America Needs a New Triad to Restore Its Eroding Deterrence

ANDREW S. LIM AND JAMES D. FEARON

In 1959, the American political scientist Albert Wohlstetter argued in these pages that the United States did not possess a sufficient second-strike capability to provide stable nuclear deterrence against the Soviet Union. A year later, the economist and strategist Thomas Schelling offered what has become the seminal definition of strategic nuclear stability. "It is not the 'balance'—the sheer equality or symmetry in the situation—that constitutes mutual deterrence," he wrote in *The Strategy of Conflict*. "It is the stability of the balance." Schelling concluded that two nuclear powers can achieve a stable balance only "when neither, in striking first, can destroy the other's ability to strike back." This insight became a pillar of U.S. nuclear strategy, which is premised

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Illustration by Edward Tuckwell

on the principle that large portions of the nuclear force must be able to survive and retaliate against any first strike by an adversary.

Today, the United States faces a parallel strategic challenge with its conventional forces in the western Pacific. Since the early years of this century, China has vastly expanded the quantity and quality of its conventional missile arsenal, especially precision-guided ballistic missiles, which it could use in a first strike to inflict grave damage on conventional U.S. forces in the region. To counter this growing threat, strategists in Washington have begun to consider the United States' options for a preemptive conventional attack against China's conventional forces, a strategy that appears dangerously reminiscent of the U.S. Cold War doctrines that Wohlstetter and Schelling argued increased first-strike incentives. For example, in February 2024, in response to questions from the Senate Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Navy Admiral Samuel Paparo, President Joe Biden's nominee to head the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, stated that preventing China from using its conventional missile arsenal against U.S. forces was his highest priority. As he put it, the United States needs to be able to "blind" Chinese forces—in broad terms, to disable Beijing's burgeoning conventional precision-strike capabilities before they can inflict significant damage on U.S. forces.

But as happened in the Cold War, once the Soviet Union began to reach nuclear parity with the United States, such an objective would likely prove difficult if not infeasible. China's inventory of mobile missiles and its accompanying communications and surveillance infrastructure is large and dispersed, with many systems housed in underground facilities spread over its vast territory. Even if the United States were to attempt a large-scale first strike on these capabilities, doing so would present significant escalatory risks. Moreover, if Beijing suspected that U.S. strategy was premised on preemption, China would have powerful incentives to quickly blind and disable U.S. capabilities before having its own forces blinded. U.S. forces' vulnerability thus exacerbates reciprocal first-strike incentives, a classic recipe for crisis instability.

The logic articulated by Wohlstetter, Schelling, and others suggests a way to escape this dilemma. During the Cold War, the United States stabilized deterrence by developing a "nuclear triad"—deploying its nuclear weapons across the domains of sea, air, and land in ways that were and remain difficult for an adversary to find and disable in a first strike. Namely, it used ballistic missile submarines, which are highly elusive at sea; developed "bomber alert" operations, by which bombers

could be quickly scattered to multiple bases, or even kept airborne, to ensure that they could not all be caught at once (even by a surprise first strike); and in Europe, deployed road-mobile launch vehicles, which are difficult to target when they are moving through cluttered terrain.

By contrast, many of the United States' conventional assets in the Indo-Pacific, such as its surface ships, are highly visible or heavily dependent on fixed facilities that could easily be targeted. If a crisis were to break out, the United States might have to threaten escalation to compensate for its lack of conventional response options—potentially up to the nuclear level. To remedy this problem, the United States should develop a "conventional triad" modeled on its successful nuclear strategy. Such a force structure would both increase U.S. combat credibility and decrease first-strike incentives on both sides.

The U.S. nuclear force structure provides a basic template for building a conventional triad. Like their nuclear counterparts, U.S. ballistic and cruise missiles would be dispersed among a combination of mobile launch vehicles on land, submarines at sea, and bombers in the air. These forces would be connected through a resilient communications network analogous to the nuclear command, control, and communications system. Once established, this conventional triad could prevent the destabilizing scenario in which a conventional first strike could lead to a nuclear confrontation.

COLLISION COURSE

China's rapidly expanding arsenal of conventional missiles suggests that the revolution in precision weapons is following a course similar to that of nuclear weapons. During the first 15 years of the Cold War, the United States held a significant advantage over the Soviet Union in nuclear weapons and delivery systems, but the Soviets eventually caught up. By the late 1960s, Moscow was approaching nuclear parity with Washington.

Likewise, in the 1980s and 1990s, the United States developed and maintained a monopoly over conventional precision-strike capabilities, such as stealth aircraft and GPS-guided bombs and missiles, which it employed to great effect in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the 1999 Kosovo war, the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. China drew important lessons from these systems and sought to replicate them. As the political scientist M. Taylor Fravel wrote in his 2019 study of Chinese military strategy, *Active Defense*, Beijing's doctrine

and capabilities today emphasize so-called keypoint strikes designed to "paralyze [the enemy's] ability to fight, rather than simply annihilating an opponent's forces." The long-range precision weapons in China's arsenal are now well suited for this task, especially against U.S. forces in the western Pacific, which are highly visible and heavily dependent on fixed infrastructure close to mainland China.

The United States has hardly been unaware of China's development of precision-strike weapons. Since 2002, the Defense Department has cataloged Chinese missile forces in its annual report on China's military power. In 2005, the report estimated China's missile inventory at approximately 700 short-range ballistic missiles and much smaller numbers of longer-range weapons, most of which were likely armed with nuclear payloads: around 20 medium-range ballistic missiles, roughly 20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles, and approximately 40 intercontinental ballistic missiles. Today, the situation has transformed: the 2024 report found that China's forces include 900 short-range, 1,300 medium-range, 500 intermediate-range, and 400 intercontinental ballistic missiles. Apart from the ICBMs, almost all of China's ballistic missiles can carry conventional explosive payloads, showing the extent to which Beijing values conventional strike capabilities.

In addition to these advances in ballistic missiles, China has also developed a formidable arsenal of cruise missiles. Although they are slower than ballistic missiles, cruise missiles cost less to produce and can therefore be manufactured in greater quantities, and they have variable trajectories, allowing them to evade detection and defenses in a way that ballistic missiles cannot. The 2024 report counts only the estimated 400 ground-launched cruise missiles belonging to China's People's Liberation Army Rocket Force. But this is a small fraction of Beijing's overall cruise missile inventory, which also includes highly capable antiship and land-attack cruise missiles aboard surface ships, submarines, aircraft, and ground vehicles. This force structure makes China's conventional forces difficult to target, disable, or eliminate.

These missile capabilities are enabled by China's C4ISR—command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance—systems, which are based on the ground, in the air, and in space. Together, these resources underpin a strategy that Beijing calls "counterintervention" (often referred to as "anti-access/area denial" in the West), which seeks to protect Chinese forces while threatening U.S. forces and bases in the western Pacific with heavy damage or

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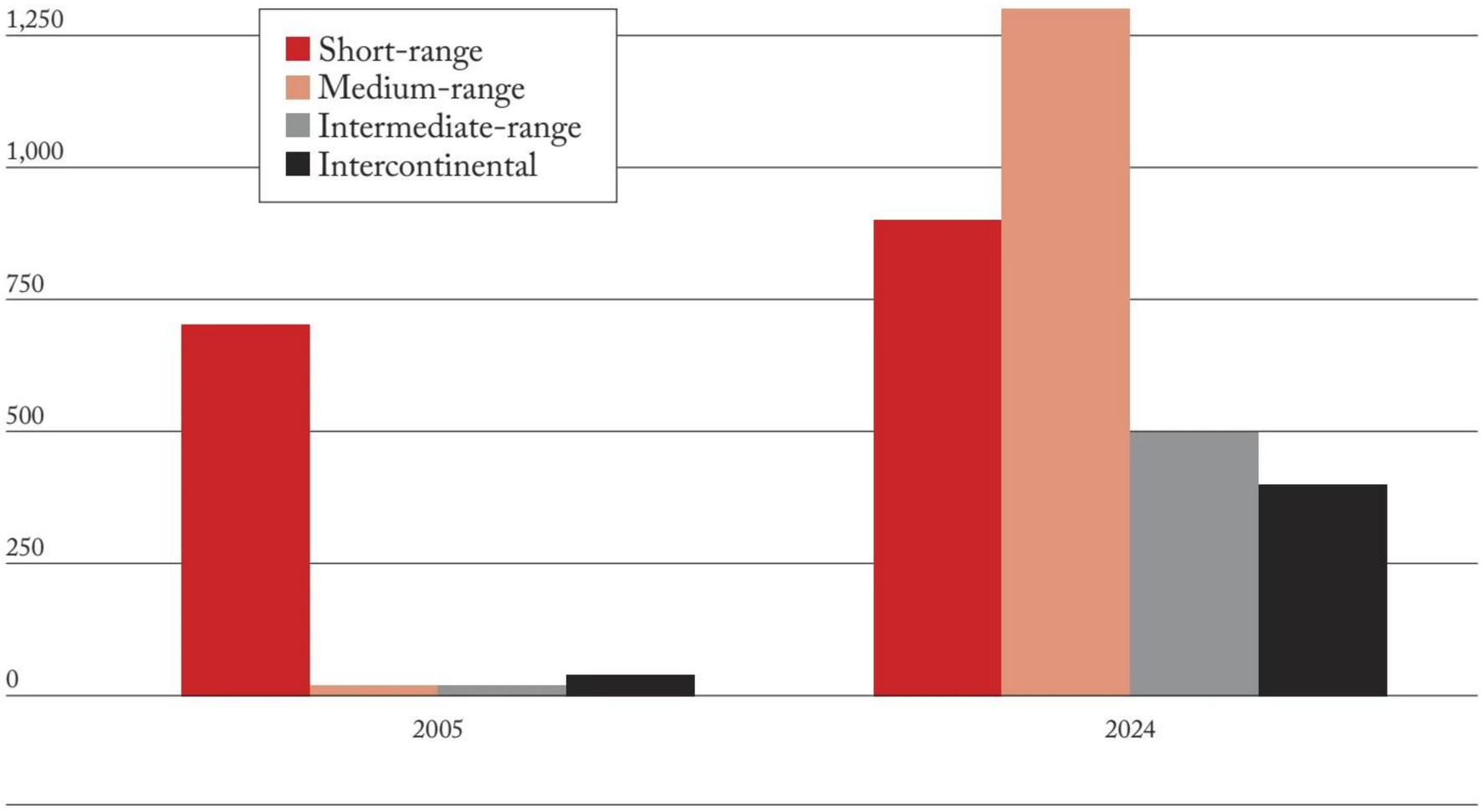
China's ballistic missile stockpile by range, 2005 and 2024



Source: Approximate number of missiles collected from data in Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China *annual reports to Congress for 2005 and 2024, U.S. Department of Defense.*

destruction. The aim of this approach is to deter U.S. engagement in a potential conflict by making intervention prohibitively costly.

The strategy appears to be working. After conducting a war game in 2023, the Center for Strategic and International Studies found that Beijing's counterintervention capabilities would impose steep costs on U.S. forces in a conflict, including the loss of two forward-based aircraft carriers and up to 20 cruisers and destroyers, with commensurate losses in aircraft, infrastructure, and personnel. Such losses would represent a significant proportion of the 11 carriers and approximately 80 cruisers and destroyers currently in service around the world. CSIS concluded that "such losses would damage the U.S. global position for many years." These outcomes suggest that the United States' ability to deter a conventional conflict with China may be inadequate and call into question whether the United States would prevail in a war if deterrence failed.

To address this heightened risk to its forces, the United States could seek to preempt or disable China's conventional precision-strike capabilities, either by attacking the strike weapons directly or the C4ISR networks that enable them. But the scale, redundancy, and continued growth of China's information systems capabilities, mobile missile inventory, and underground facilities are likely to make such an objective difficult to

achieve. The 2024 China military power report notes, for example, that the People's Liberation Army maintains thousands of technologically advanced underground facilities "to conceal and protect all aspects of its military forces," and it is rapidly building more. U.S. attempts to attack those forces or this infrastructure at a scale necessary to achieve useful military effects would likely carry real escalatory risks.

Defense strategists both inside and outside China continue to debate which actions by an adversary Beijing might regard as "first use" and therefore might prompt a Chinese nuclear response under the country's no-first-use policy. But it is reasonable to assume that China could view a U.S. effort to preempt or disable its precision-strike capabilities as attacking vital Chinese interests or even setting the stage for an attack on Beijing's nuclear capabilities—especially if the preemptive strikes degraded China's nuclear early warning or nuclear command-and-control systems, whether intentionally or not. The United States certainly might view a large-scale attack on its own precision-strike capabilities and C4ISR systems in the same way.

The United States needs more elusive conventional forces.

China's attainment of parity with or even superiority over the United States in precision-strike capability has prompted U.S. planners to seek other countermeasures. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union's achievement of nuclear parity, together with its significant conventional advantage in Europe, led U.S. strategists to adopt what is known as the "second offset." To counteract, or offset, Soviet numerical advantages, the United States developed stealth and precision-strike capabilities that could maximize the effect of each weapon and pinpoint key targets such as command and communications centers or bridges and other logistical chokepoints. But with China now able to match or surpass the United States in precision capabilities, the second offset strategy no longer offsets. In late 2014, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel and Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work announced a new initiative for a "third offset," with the aim of harnessing disruptive technological advantages for U.S. forces in response to the loss of the U.S. monopoly on conventional precision-strike capabilities. Most discussions of a third offset have focused on technologies such as artificial intelligence, autonomous systems or drones, and sensor fusion, which allows forces across multiple domains to see and respond to the same picture of the battlefield.

But no new strategic approach is likely to succeed unless it provides the United States with forces that have an assured ability to survive large-scale conventional attacks. A U.S. conventional triad would present China with a choice between a limited first strike, which would likely fail to seriously degrade U.S. forces, and a large-scale first strike, which would carry a significant risk of escalation and might still fail to find U.S. submarines at sea, bombers dispersed or already airborne, or mobile missile launchers out of garrison. Regardless of China's choice, a greater proportion of U.S. conventional forces would be left to respond. Deterrence would thus be strengthened at the conventional level by the same logic that Wohlstetter and Schelling elucidated for nuclear stability in the late 1950s and that has helped keep the peace at the nuclear level for nearly three-quarters of a century.

TARGET LOCKED

Just as the Soviets' achievement of nuclear parity challenged the United States to revise its theory of nuclear deterrence and, as a consequence, its force structure, China's achievement of parity in precision-strike capabilities now requires the United States to rethink how it should construct its conventional forces. U.S. forces should be able to defeat and deter a large-scale Chinese conventional missile attack while maintaining a condition in which, as Schelling described it, "neither, in striking first, can destroy the other's ability to strike back."

In a 2014 report, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments noted that the U.S. defense program was "heavily skewed" toward capabilities aimed at "low-medium threat environment[s]," referring to conflicts with adversaries that lacked the ability to seriously threaten forces such as surface ships and short-range or nonstealthy aircraft. This remains largely the case today, despite the global proliferation of precision-strike capabilities. At the same time, the vulnerability of U.S. conventional forces creates powerful first-strike incentives for both sides, making minor political crises and military frictions more dangerous and prone to escalation.

For these reasons, the same principles that guided the U.S. response to Soviet nuclear parity can apply to conventional forces today. Of central importance is developing survivable forces that would be more costly in time and money for an attacker to overcome than for a defender to build. The inherent difficulty of finding submarines in the open ocean, bombers dispersed and airborne, and road-mobile missile launchers on the move ensures the survivability of a greater proportion of the force.

By contrast, defending fixed bases or highly visible surface ships often requires an active missile defense that must "hit a bullet with a bullet"—a proposition that is almost always much more costly than firing that first bullet. Equipping mobile platforms with long-range munitions, such as medium-range or intermediate-range ballistic or cruise missiles, amplifies their survivability by allowing them to roam farther from an adversary's densest concentrations of sensors and weapons and by multiplying geometrically the area that an adversary must search.

Multiple analyses and war games over many years have corroborated the basic conclusion that submarines, bombers, and mobile land-based missile launchers equipped with long-range strike weapons and resilient communications technology are the most survivable and effective assets in an environment dense with precision-strike capabilities, such as the one China has created in the western Pacific. In other words, to make its conventional arsenal survivable, the United States must replace its current stock of fixed and visible assets with elusive forces in multiple domains, following the nuclear triad model.

ASYMMETRIC ADVANTAGE

In almost any prospective conflict with China, the United States will be on the defending side. Since at least the end of World War II, Washington has generally opposed states' attempts to change international boundaries by force as a matter of principle—one that is enshrined in treaties with Japan and the Philippines and in law regarding Taiwan. By contrast, Beijing's policies and objectives imply a need for offensive military action: China must change territorial realities to achieve its stated goals.

This strategic reality disadvantages the United States in one respect: China would almost certainly have the initiative at the outset of a conflict because it would move first. Given the way that U.S. forces are constructed today, U.S. defense strategists face a difficult choice between preemption, with its attendant risks of escalation, and the real possibility of a first strike by Beijing, with the heavy losses that would cause. Apart from the high visibility of U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific region, the U.S. military's basing infrastructure is sprawling and fixed; its logistics are dependent on unprotected commercial support, such as commercial ships, cargo aircraft, and computer networks, which may be more vulnerable than military assets; and its space-based communications infrastructure, despite recent technological advances, is still dependent on a relatively small number of satellites. Indeed, Chinese

military doctrine has explicitly set for its forces the task of disabling this U.S. infrastructure and the weapons platforms that rely on it, and Beijing has shaped its formidable missile arsenal to achieve that goal.

At the same time, the United States and its partners would have one significant advantage if China were to act on its revanchist claims against Taiwan: they would be defending against an amphibious assault, widely acknowledged as being among the most challenging of military operations. To take and hold territory beyond the Chinese mainland, China must expose its forces over open water and in complex landing operations, while the United States and its partners can conceal their forces and fortify their positions on terrain that they already control.

A conventional triad would impose asymmetric challenges on any U.S. adversary.

But to fully maximize these advantages, the United States must restructure its conventional forces in the Indo-Pacific. A force weighted toward submarines, long-range bombers (or similar capabilities), and road-mobile missile launchers would reduce the current dependence on highly visible surface ships and short-range aircraft operating from bases close to China, which are within range of the largest number of Chinese missiles.

Making such a shift will be a significant undertaking, but the United States undertook a similar effort when it designed and constructed the nuclear triad. One indication of the logic of the approach is that other nuclear powers, including China, India, and Russia, have replicated the structure, fielding nuclear weapons in some combination of submarines, bombers, and road- or rail-based mobile launch vehicles. (Silo-based ICBMs, which also form part of the land-based triad, are less survivable and contribute to deterrence by a different logic: they force states to choose between using one of their nuclear weapons on an adversary's silo, thereby forgoing a more valuable target, and using one on a more valuable target, accepting the damage that the intact silo's missile might cause.) This basic force structure is a product of operations analysis and refinement over the 80 years of the nuclear age, grounded in the deterrence logic that points to the indispensability of an assured second strike.

To build an effective conventional triad, the United States must invest in more submarines, bombers, and mobile launch vehicles. This would entail, for example, redoubling current efforts to increase the production of Virginia-class attack submarines; increasing the production of

B-21 bombers; accelerating air force efforts to deploy a "palletized" munitions launch system, which enables transport aircraft to launch conventional cruise missiles; and expanding the range and capacity of the Marine Littoral Regiments and the U.S. Army's Mid-Range Capability, a land-based missile launcher system that was recently deployed to the Philippines.

To support this new force structure, the United States will need more advanced communications and surveillance systems. These could take the form of a large array of satellites or clusters of satellites that would be resilient to Chinese attack, especially when augmented by large numbers of uncrewed aerial vehicles that can detect adversarial forces and serve as nodes for communication. Each component of the triad must also be equipped with deep magazines of the medium- and intermediate-range conventional cruise and ballistic missiles—especially antiship missiles—that China already possesses in the many thousands.

Constructed in this way, the U.S. conventional force would impose asymmetric challenges on any adversary. For one thing, it would cost an adversary much more to discover and destroy U.S. forces in all three domains than it would cost the United States to operate those forces. The munitions that those mobile platforms carry are likewise usually cheaper to employ than to defend against because of the speed of ballistic missiles and the maneuverability of cruise missiles. The difficulty of finding and defending against these platforms and their weapons essentially ensures that a significant proportion of the force would survive a first strike and thus be able to launch a second. China and the United States are also both developing hypersonic weapons, which, although costly, are likely to make missiles even harder to defend against by combining the properties of speed and maneuverability.

Should a major conflict break out between China and the United States, the ability of the United States to protect its conventional forces and provide an assured second strike would also reduce its number of losses relative to China's. This could be crucial in a contest against a state with vast economic, technological, and industrial resources. Since neither side would be able to achieve a total victory akin to the Allied defeat of Japan and Germany in World War II, the United States' ability to minimize its losses and reconstitute its forces and preparedness, especially relative to China's ability to do the same, would become a salient measure of success. By contrast, a conflict in which the United States successfully defended against a first attack but at such a high cost

that it could not defend against a second would put it at a long-term disadvantage. Survivable combat capabilities are therefore essential not only to deterrence but also to guaranteeing a stable postconflict balance should deterrence fail.

BALANCING ACT

The principle of an assured second strike has underpinned nuclear stability for more than half a century. Because of advances in technology, this logic increasingly applies at the conventional level. If the United States is to retain the credible ability to defeat and thereby deter a Chinese attempt to revise the East Asian political order by military means, U.S. conventional forces will need to develop an assured second-strike capability. By reducing incentives on both sides to strike first, such a capability would also reduce the likelihood of inadvertent and potentially catastrophic escalation.

The Defense Department and Congress have taken important steps to increase the production of conventionally armed submarines, bombers, and mobile missile launchers and to develop resilient communications and surveillance infrastructure. There is broad bipartisan support for developing mobile land-based long-range missile capabilities through the army's Multi-Domain Task Forces and the Marines' Littoral Regiments and for expanding the production of U.S. attack submarines beyond two per year. There is also significant backing for expanding procurement of long-range weapons, such as the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile Extended Range and the Tomahawk cruise missile. The air force, for its part, has long recognized the importance of the B-21 strategic bomber and continues to develop options to use cargo aircraft such as the C-17 and C-130 as large-capacity munitions launchers. And the Defense Department's efforts to expand its use of proliferated satellite constellations such as Starlink will enable all its fighting forces to better communicate with one another, detect adversaries, and coordinate attacks, among other essential functions.

The Defense Department has also made recent efforts to accelerate the development of low-cost autonomous systems, such as uncrewed aerial and underwater vehicles. These include the Replicator initiative, the department's program to develop and field these systems, and the "Hellscape" concept for the systems' use in the Indo-Pacific. By fielding large numbers of relatively inexpensive drones, these programs offer important ways to offset China's numerical advantages in military assets.

And if positioned close to the adversary, these systems could potentially respond to an attack more quickly than U.S. ships or planes that would have to travel from Alaska, Hawaii, Guam, or the West Coast of the continental United States. For now, however, Replicator-type systems are a specific solution to the specific problem of defending U.S. partners close to China on short notice. As Paparo told *The Washington Post* in June 2024, Hellscape is intended primarily to buy time—to make the lives of Chinese troops "utterly miserable for a month, which buys me the time for the rest of everything."

The "rest" of the task, which involves a broad reconfiguring of U.S. forces in the western Pacific, remains a work in progress. U.S. submarine and munitions industrial bases remain sclerotic and are improving only slowly and at significant cost. The construction of 100 or more B-21 bombers will take a decade or longer. Boeing stopped building C-17s in 2015, and the air force's plans for its next-generation cargo transports remain in infancy. Meanwhile, the ultimate range and capacity of the mobile land-based firing capabilities of the army and the Marine Corps have not yet been fully determined. To keep pace with China's continued missile development, all these force levels would have to be greatly increased.

The constraints and challenges that stand in the way of developing these capabilities are real. But China is not slowing its efforts to expand its conventional precision-strike arsenal, and the threat posed to U.S. allies and partners in the western Pacific by China's military modernization is not going away. If the United States perceives the current security architecture in the region as a vital interest, it must be prepared to build a stable conventional deterrence equilibrium that will endure for as long as it expects China to be a military challenger.

Construction of a conventional triad would not only produce a more powerful deterrent but also lower the risks of rapid conventional or even nuclear escalation if deterrence fails. Just as U.S. strategists during the Cold War discovered when the Soviets achieved nuclear parity, their successors facing a world of long-range precision-guided conventional weapons today may find that a stable balance of deterrence remains possible. It will depend, however, on U.S. forces acquiring a credible and assured conventional second-strike capability. This will force Washington to make difficult choices amid sharp political and budgetary debates. But the approach is feasible. And the alternative—increasing levels of risk to U.S. forces, to deterrence in the western Pacific, and to crisis stability—is not one the United States can afford to accept.

The Empty Arsenal of Democracy

How America Can Build a New Defense Industrial Base

MICHAEL BROWN

It is every president's nightmare. The Chinese military is massing troops in Fujian Province and an armada offshore, just across the strait from Taiwan. According to U.S. intelligence, this buildup is no mere feint—Beijing is really preparing for war. Global stock markets are crashing, as the world faces what economists estimate could be a $10 trillion shock. The White House must suddenly answer a question it has long put off: Will it use military force to defend Taiwan?

This is not an outlandish hypothetical. Chinese President Xi Jinping has made clear that retaking Taiwan is essential to what his government calls "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," and Beijing is rapidly expanding its military. It is also just one of many scenarios that would result in a war involving Washington. China is threatening the United States' treaty allies. Russia is menacing eastern Europe's NATO members.

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Illustration by Lincoln Agnew

Iran has accelerated its nuclear program. The odds that the United States might have to fight in a great-power war are higher today than at any point this century.

The U.S. military is arguably the most powerful in the world. But it is not ready for such a conflict. Its weapons are sophisticated. Its soldiers are second to none. Yet the United States has low stockpiles of munitions, its ships and planes are older than China's, and its industrial base lacks the capacity to regenerate these assets. The U.S. supply of precision-strike missiles, for example, would last no more than a few weeks in a high-intensity conflict and would take years to replace. In war games that simulate a conflict in the Taiwan Strait, Washington runs out of key munitions within weeks.

American officials are aware of the shortages. In response, Congress and the Department of Defense have contracted to expand existing defense production lines and, in some cases, to restart old ones. Yet these recent efforts are insufficient to compensate for more than three decades of complacency and atrophy. Washington has hiked defense spending to $825 billion—a record nominal level. But this represents under three percent of U.S. GDP, the lowest level this century and among the lowest since World War II. Of that $825 billion, just 21 percent is dedicated to procuring new munitions and equipment.

To address this failure, Washington must act now. The Trump administration, in partnership with Congress, must undertake six urgent initiatives: modernizing existing assets, broadening defense capabilities, expanding stockpiles and manufacturing capacity for munitions, increasing competition and reducing supplier vulnerabilities, changing how the Pentagon does business, and increasing funding levels and continuity of funding. To be effective, these initiatives must be implemented together. A piecemeal approach will be insufficient. Increasing the American defense budget, for instance, is essential, but it will not be enough to meet U.S. needs unless Washington increases the number of companies in the defense industrial base and adds newer capabilities such as uncrewed systems, better space-based sensors, and software that can be continuously updated. Even then, American officials might struggle to get what they need unless the armed forces can more easily buy equipment and supplies from U.S. allies. Finally, the Pentagon needs to dramatically reform its management practices and procurement processes to focus on speed and efficacy.

Increasing defense spending may be a tough sell in Washington, given that both the Trump administration and progressives in Congress want

to reduce the military's footprint. But policymakers should remember that preventing a war is much cheaper than fighting one. With increased military spending on quantity and quality, Washington can make a potential Chinese invasion more costly and risky, creating doubt in Xi's mind about his odds of succeeding. And if a U.S. military buildup does not stop a Chinese assault on Taiwan, Washington will be even happier that it expanded its arsenal. The United States, after all, will not have the time required to ramp up production once a conflict begins.

THE QUALITY OF QUANTITY

From 1989 to 1999, the United States cut its defense budget by nearly a third. The Cold War was over, so U.S. officials no longer saw the need for an enormous military. Congress continued to spend on major defense platforms, such as the F-22 aircraft and Nimitz-class aircraft carriers. But it drastically reduced the budget for munitions and smaller weapons. The defense industrial base consolidated, and its investment in capacity and workforce declined. Suppliers focused on minimum rates of production, just-in-time inventory management, and cost reductions.

None of this worried most U.S. strategists. After the first Gulf war, in which the United States defeated the sixth-largest army in six days with very few casualties, analysts assumed that future wars would likely be short and would not require massive stockpiles of basic munitions and materiel. Military planners assumed there would be future quick victories secured by technological superiority.

For three decades, this reasoning largely held. From 2001 to 2002, the United States drove the Taliban into exile, and it rapidly defeated the Iraqi military in the second Gulf war that began in 2003. But the resulting, lengthy insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq proved that this vision of quick victories was a fallacy. Instead, asymmetric capabilities and sustained political will helped the insurgents outlast the U.S. military. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine was further proof that the equation had changed. Defying the predictions of defense analysts, the Ukrainians successfully ground the wealthier, better-equipped Russian military to a halt, locking the two sides in a war of attrition that has cost thousands of lives and millions of munitions. Now, militaries are relearning the lessons of both world wars: major conflicts can still turn into slugfests, and industrial capacity is decisive.

The war in Ukraine also exposed just how bare Washington's military cupboard is. U.S. officials have struggled to supply Kyiv with enough of

the weapons it needs, and they have understandably fretted about their own defensive stocks. Although the exact number of missiles the United States has is classified, it is likely a few tens of thousands. Russia has fired almost 12,000 missiles in the last two years.

The American military suffers from munitions shortages across almost every weapons category. It lacks short- and medium-range missiles. Most important for a conflict in the Pacific, it has insufficient long-range precision missiles—such as the navy's long-range antiship missiles, joint air-to-surface standoff missiles, and the army's precision-strike missiles. According to war games conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the United States might use 5,000 long-range precision missiles per week and run out after three to four weeks. The United States would also not be able to replace these missiles fast enough. According to a 2021 CSIS study on mobilization, it would take two years to begin replenishing long-range antiship missiles. Such are the consequences of letting the stocks dwindle and the industrial base shrivel: American defense manufacturers lack the parts, expertise, and factory space required to churn out new munitions stocks, as well as the cash flow from new Pentagon orders to ramp up production or invest in capacity.

In just the last five years, the defense industrial base has lost 17,045 independent companies.

To understand why, consider the Stinger: a surface-to-air missile with infrared capabilities to home in on targets but that is lightweight and shoulder fired. Stingers are portable and highly effective against enemy aircraft and drones and have therefore been essential in Ukraine. As a result, the United States has sent well over 1,000 of them to Kyiv. Washington is trying to replace these weapons, but the Stinger was originally designed in the 1970s, and the military last ordered them 20 years ago. Raytheon, the defense contractor, has had to hire retired engineers to make new ones. It has had to re-create obsolete components. The resulting bottlenecks meant that Raytheon was able to make just 60 Stingers per month over the course of 2024.

Washington is also in need of new ships and planes—the average navy vessel is 19 years old, and the average air force plane is 32 years old. Some ships and planes are 50 years old. On average, major defense systems such as these take more than eight years to make. Meanwhile, 70 percent of the ships in China's navy have been launched since 2010. China's annual

shipbuilding capacity is also 26 million tons, or a staggering 370 times the United States' shipbuilding capacity of 70,000 tons. The United States does not even have enough industrywide capacity to make a single Ford-class aircraft carrier per year. (These carriers weigh 100,000 tons.)

Washington's needs are particularly acute when it comes to the chemicals used in propellants and explosives, known as "energetics." Investments in these substances and the productive capacity to make them have been especially low; the two energetics most widely used by the United States are chemical compounds from World War II, typically made in government factories from that era. Meanwhile, China and Russia have been aggressively funding more sophisticated energetics programs, leveraging U.S. research. Alarmingly, the United States relies on foreign countries, including China, for about one-third of the raw materials it uses in energetics production.

Washington lags not just when it comes to traditional military wares such as missiles, ships, and energetics. It is also behind on newer innovations, including affordable drones. These systems are absolutely integral to the future of war. Ukraine, for instance, has used swarms of cheap drones to destroy or disable a third of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Russia, meanwhile, has used them to knock out chunks of the Ukrainian power grid. And the Israel Defense Forces have used uncrewed systems to defeat Hamas in dense urban and subterranean complexes. But today, there are no U.S. manufacturers of low-cost drones anywhere near the size of DJI, the Chinese company and global leader, which makes a very capable $1,000 drone that has been heavily used in Ukraine. Meanwhile, until late 2024, there was only one U.S. supplier of loitering munitions (suicide drones designed to loiter in an area and locate and strike targets with precision): AeroVironment, which has a contract to make 1,000 of them.

The Defense Department has started to make larger investments in affordable drones. Its Replicator program, established in 2023, was created specifically to buy thousands of them. But since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine has blown through an average of 10,000 drones a month. The American government has allocated only 0.3 percent of the defense procurement budget to this effort, about the same amount as it dedicates to the close-air-support A-10 Warthog, which the military no longer wants.

CASH FLOW

The simplest way for Washington to stimulate increased defense production is to spend more on it. The $172 billion allocated in 2024 for

new equipment is wholly inadequate for modernizing aircraft squadrons, updating ship fleets, producing new munitions, and buying new technology such as uncrewed systems. Washington should appropriate at least twice as much funding. Some of this increase can be covered by cutting spending as the Department of Government Efficiency, led by the presidential adviser Elon Musk, is attempting to do. But whatever is not covered by efficiencies elsewhere should be paid for by tax increases.

Congress should also reform how it funds military purchases. Typically, the Pentagon receives just one year of funding at a time for procurement, which does not provide a signal to suppliers about how much of their products Washington might need in the future. Additionally, the military must contend with "continuing resolutions"—stopgap measures that Congress increasingly relies on to avoid government shutdowns. These both slow down military spending and recklessly speed it up. From the beginning of the government fiscal year until Congress passes a new budget, the Pentagon usually cannot start new programs and must limit spending to the previous year's budget—or sometimes just a fraction of that budget. When an annual budget does pass, the Pentagon must suddenly rush to spend, as any unspent funds are returned to the U.S. Treasury, resulting in inefficiency and waste.

Instead, Congress should pass multiyear appropriations for military purchases and create a consistently funded defense modernization plan, one that includes a munitions buildup. Doing so would give the Pentagon greater flexibility and leeway to spend as it sees fit. It would also show defense manufacturers that there will be long-term demand, incentivizing them to make bigger investments in production by hiring and training workers, building and expanding factories, and establishing more resilient supply chains. In 2024, Congress took a small step in this direction by approving multiyear purchases for six critical munitions. But to really show suppliers that the military needs increased quantities and the ability to surge production, all military goods should be given multiyear contracts, not just half a dozen missile types.

Multiyear appropriations would reduce Congress's ability to adjust military spending. Although that might irritate some, it would be good for the military's readiness and help suppliers better plan production quantities and reduce costs. Under the current system, individual members of Congress can force the Pentagon to buy goods made in their districts irrespective of how useful they are. Last year, for example, Congress required the purchase of multiple items the Pentagon does not need or

want, such as C-130J cargo planes, P-8 Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft, and littoral combat ships.

Until Congress reforms how it appropriates money for defense, attempts to modernize the U.S. military will not match the speed and decisiveness of Xi's efforts to build up the Chinese military. In fact, the situation is so dire that the White House should invoke the Defense Production Act to develop new and more powerful energetics, expand munitions production, and create strategic reserves of both. Doing so would not be a replacement for setting much higher long-term budget levels or instituting multiyear appropriations. But by placing orders to fill strategic reserves, the White House could at least incentivize the development of advanced energetics, the production of more munitions, and investments in manufacturing capacity.

REVERSING THE LAST SUPPER

Increasing and reforming appropriations will be essential to fixing the defense industry. But such changes are not enough. The government will have to expand the U.S. defense industry itself, which has become so concentrated that firms have become less cost competitive, resulting in higher prices for many weapons systems. More spending, after all, will go only so far when each new F-35 costs $80 million and each new Ford-class aircraft carrier costs $13.3 billion. At the end of the Cold War, there were more than 50 top defense suppliers. Today, a total of five firms hold significant shares in the defense market, each with annual revenue that exceeds $10 billion. Collectively, they receive about 70 percent of defense contracts (measured by contract value), with the largest supplier, Lockheed Martin, receiving 40 percent. Many of the smaller firms that supplied the Defense Department have gone out of business or pivoted away from the Pentagon: in just the last five years, the defense industrial base has lost 17,045 independent companies. The total number of small companies supplying the Defense Department declined by more than 40 percent over the last decade.

Because of this concentration, the Pentagon has woefully few options when it is looking to buy essential weapons and munitions. Before the end of the Cold War, the government could shop for tactical missiles from 13 suppliers. In 2022, it could source from just three. The number of fixed-wing aircraft suppliers declined from eight to three, and the number of satellite suppliers fell from eight to four. The number of surface ship suppliers declined from eight to two. Nearly two-thirds of major defense programs have only a single bidder.

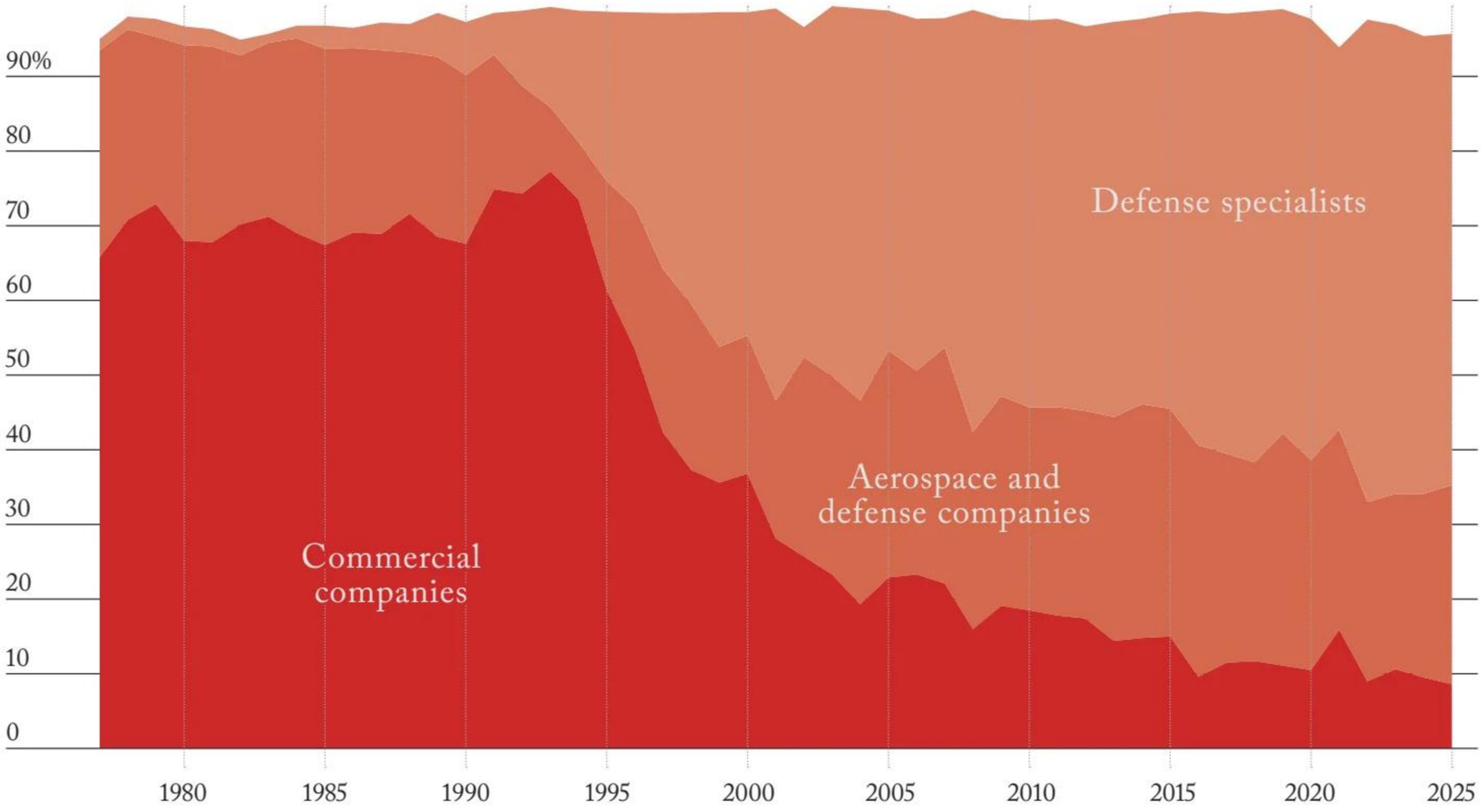
This is a problem of Washington's own making. At the end of the Cold War, at a meeting now known as the Last Supper, the Defense Department encouraged manufacturers to merge, figuring that the decline in defense spending meant there would no longer be enough purchases to support the industry as it existed. The companies listened, acquired one another, and gobbled up defense businesses embedded in commercial vendors. The toll has been profound. In addition to raising prices, this consolidation has allowed firms to shed manufacturing capacity with little consequence—including by switching to narrow, just-in-time supply chains that are highly vulnerable to disruption. Today, just one company supplies the turbofan engines used in most U.S. cruise missiles. Consolidation and an increasing focus on short-term shareholder value has also led to more financial engineering designed to increase share values, such as repeated rounds of stock buybacks. The result is less investment in the adoption of new technologies, output, or long-term research and development.

The average R & D of defense primes (the largest defense contractors) today is one to four percent of revenue. Major technology firms, by comparison, spend between ten and 20 percent of revenue on R & D. As a result, consumer products are often more sophisticated than military ones. There is more AI in a Tesla than in any military vehicle, and there is more processing power in a four-year-old iPhone than in an F-35. The United States is the world's leading software power—the home of Apple, Google, and Microsoft—yet these software powerhouses are not the principal designers of American major weapons platforms, and the software in these platforms is not updated nearly as continuously as it is in consumer devices. The resulting difference in functionality and the lag in updates means U.S. forces are more vulnerable than they need to be.

In theory, Washington could shore up this weakness by hiring commercial firms to make military products or at least supply the software. In some cases, it has. The Pentagon, for example, has started working with SpaceX to take advantage of its reusable rockets and boosters and with Palantir to incorporate AI into systems for better targeting. But for the most part, the U.S. tech sector does not make defense products. In fact, just 30 percent of U.S. defense firm revenue today comes from commercial customers. In China, that figure is 70 percent. The result is that the United States faces long waits for new products and higher costs, since commercial competition stimulates more efficiency and speed. On average, it can take 17 years for the Pentagon to oversee the development, testing, and adoption of a complex new system, such as a submarine.

CROWDING OUT

Percentage of the United States' major weapons systems acquisition budget by industrial category, 1980–2025



Source: Martin Bollinger, Doug Berenson, Gregory G. Allen. Data measures all U.S. Defense Department investment spending on major defense acquisition programs.

In the private sector, in which open standards, rapid product development, and fierce competition are the norm, many software innovations can be developed within a year and almost instantaneously adopted by consumers. It is unrealistic for defense manufacturers to deliver a new submarine in a year. But in the 1950s, the air force developed, tested, and put new planes into use within five years. The Defense Department and its suppliers have moved much faster in the past and can do so again with different incentives than are in place today.

Another lever for augmenting the defense industrial base is facilitating Defense Department procurement from allies. Right now, U.S. defense firms are largely protected thanks to "Buy American" provisions enacted into law for military purchases. This not only limits competition but also restricts the United States' ability to increase stockpiles and modernize more quickly since U.S. defense firms face production and supply chain constraints. In reverse, American defense firms are limited in what they can sell to allies due to the State Department's International Traffic in Arms Regulations process, which controls the manufacturing, sales, and

distribution of U.S.-made defense products. Instead, Washington should create a system that differentiates between goods sold to close allies, more distant allies, and other types of countries. The United States could then exempt its closest friends from approvals before buying American defense products, allowing allies to purchase U.S. planes, ships, and other weapons systems much faster than they can today.

By working with its allies, the U.S. military might be able to more quickly diversify its supply chains away from China. Currently, China dominates many manufacturing sectors that are essential to the U.S. military, such as advanced battery supplies. China also makes more large cast and forged products—including landing gear, engine components, brakes, turbine disks, and fan blades—than the next nine countries combined. Furthermore, China exports large amounts of titanium, aluminum, refined rare-earth minerals, high-temperature materials, and chips. Thanks to this dominance, Beijing could deal a significant blow to the United States' ability to fight by refusing to supply key components for defense production.

The U.S. military is trying to reduce its reliance on Chinese suppliers. From 2022 to 2023, the army and navy cut their dependence on Chinese suppliers in critical technologies by 17 percent and 40 percent, respectively. But both branches still source from more than 140 Chinese firms. Meanwhile, the air force is increasing its dependence on Chinese components such as chips and rare-earth materials. The military's primary focus on lowering production costs rather than diversifying sources of supply does not help since it means defense suppliers have little incentive to invest in alternative or resilient supply chains. U.S. capital markets, too, have focused on short-term profits at the expense of security and capacity. If Washington values its ability to produce or replenish its stocks during times of war, it must invest in this capability during peacetime.

Spending more and inking multiyear appropriations can help overcome these challenges. The Pentagon can direct new funds to companies that agree to move their supply chains out of China. It can also use money to source technologies such as satellite imagery, uncrewed systems, and better software from new suppliers, increasing competition in the defense industrial base.

DAY LATE, DOLLAR SHORT

Many of these commercial companies, however, do not need to sell to the government to build a successful business. And they are often deterred by the Pentagon's requirements, such as insisting that businesses have a

mandatory "authority to operate" certification to sell new software. As a result, the Pentagon must rework its procurement process so that doing business with the armed forces is easier and speedier.

Over the last six decades, the Defense Department has created a labyrinth of rules, regulations, and confusing acquisition policies that encourage risk aversion and inertia. These are embodied in the 2,000-page Federal Acquisition Regulation, which makes it hard to purchase even simple equipment. The U.S. Army's 2006 experience replacing the decades-old Beretta handgun is indicative. Rather than simply sourcing the best handgun commercially available, the army used the defense procurement system, which begins with determining requirements rather than evaluating what is currently on the market, adding years to the process. Ultimately, it took over a decade to issue a contract award. Then, a lengthy two-year testing phase cost $17 million and contributed to further delays. In the army's initial purchases, the cost for each handgun was more expensive than buying a handgun off the shelf.

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Many of these rules date back to the 1960s, when the U.S. military was competing with its centralized enemy—the Soviet Union. This centralized and hierarchical decision-making is incompatible with the desire for speed and a rapid trial-and-error approach, called agile development, as is practiced in Silicon Valley. Indeed, defense experts sometimes joke that the Pentagon is the last place on earth still using the Soviet five-year planning system.

Reforming the Pentagon's acquisition process is not a new idea. Gallons of ink have been spilled detailing possible changes. But a simple, easy remedy is expanding the use of Other Transaction Authority for contracts. Created by Congress in 1958 as a way for NASA to move fast after the launch of Sputnik, OTA offers a better, more competitive process for purchasing goods than the Federal Acquisition Regulation. OTA purchases, for example, use fixed-price contracts rather than the cost-plus contracts the Pentagon typically signs. With cost-plus contracts, manufacturers are guaranteed profits even when they go wildly over budget and blow past deadlines.

Today's officials know how useful such Other Transactions can be. In 2020, Washington procured 300 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines during Operation Warp Speed using OTs. The Pentagon's Defense

Innovation Unit uses them to attract new vendors and buy high-tech systems. The Replicator initiative uses OTs, and so do many R & D contracts. Today, however, less than ten percent of all procurement spending is done through OTs.

OT adoption may be poised to accelerate with the recent directive from Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth that all software purchases across the department use OTs. But to make a bigger, more permanent shift, the Pentagon will have to set a new tone at the top. Right now, performance incentives encourage avoiding mistakes rather than showing initiative or measuring effectiveness—in other words, employees are measured by whether they comply with the directives, regulations, and guidance for every process. Instead, performance could be based on how quickly decisions are made, how long it takes to implement those decisions, and how effective they turn out to be. Congress, for its part, could instruct the military's inspector general to assess the Pentagon's effectiveness and speed at making decisions, including in purchasing. The inspector general could also study why firms fall behind schedule and how Pentagon processes contribute to schedule delays and overbudget contracts. Congress could also impose penalties for spurious contract award disputes, which have become commonplace as a business strategy, as such disputes open the possibility that losing companies can compete again for the contract.

These policymakers must also move quickly themselves. The Pentagon can no longer afford to wait for the outbreak of the next conflict to enact these changes. It took the United States three years to ramp up the production of planes and missiles in World War II. The country will likely not have that much time to ramp up when the next conflict begins. The Trump administration has the opportunity to deliver on peace through strength by modernizing existing assets, broadening defense capabilities, expanding stockpiles and manufacturing capacity for munitions, increasing competition and reducing supplier vulnerabilities, changing how the Pentagon does business, and increasing funding levels and continuity of funding. Given the multiyear lead times and mutually reinforcing nature of these initiatives, the administration must undertake all of them with urgency.

Only a major drive to rebuild the arsenal of democracy can deter China from taking Taiwan through force or other countries from similarly challenging the United States. As U.S. General Douglas MacArthur prophetically proclaimed in 1940: "The history of failure in war can almost be summed up in two words: Too late."

The Narrow Path to a New Middle East

A Regional Order to Contain Iran for Good

DANA STROUL

The Iranian regime is on its back foot, more vulnerable internally and exposed abroad than at any point since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Before Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack on Israel and Israel's subsequent multipronged war on Iranian interests, Iran's huge investments in its missile arsenal, its nuclear weapons program, and its network of regional proxy actors had sharply constrained the United States' strategy toward the Middle East. Washington's Iran-focused policy analysts remained divided on just what mix of tools would effectively deter Iranian aggression, but they generally agreed that if Tehran were pushed too hard, it would retain a menu of retaliatory options that risked full-scale war. Four successive U.S. presidents—George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump in his first term, and Joe Biden—all settled on using diplomacy and

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sanctions for deterrence and never authorized military strikes inside Iranian territory.

Israel's operational successes have shattered those preconceptions—and opened a window of opportunity to finish dismantling Iran's regional threat network and build a safer and more stable Middle East. Key leaders throughout Iran's so-called axis of resistance have been killed, and tens of thousands of Iranian-backed fighters have been taken off the battlefield. Axis arsenals have been devastated, and Israel has degraded the Iranian military-industrial complex that once replenished them. When Syrian President Bashar al-Assad fled Damascus in December, Tehran's leaders lost a crucial ally who had helped them turn Syria into the transit hub they used to resupply its proxy militias with weapons, funds, and fighters. Its two ballistic missile attacks on Israel in 2024 were a failure that further degraded its deterrence as well as its affiliate groups' morale, calling Tehran's value as a patron into question.

The stage is set for a new political framework that can reform and strengthen the corrupt and weak bureaucracies that Iran fed on and replace compromised leaders susceptible to Iranian influence. Preventing Iran from recouping its destructive power in the Middle East cannot be left up to Israel, which lacks the resources, alliance structure, and decades of postconflict experience to secure a new, more peaceful regional order. Nor can military force alone prevent Iranian retrenchment. Only a political process can achieve that—and the United States is best positioned to lead the way.

But the steps Trump has taken in the first months of his second term will only make it harder for Washington to seize this generational opportunity. Trump may believe that gutting the State Department's diplomatic corps and foreign assistance staff, avoiding engagement with Syria's new government, levying fresh sanctions against Iran, and escalating military strikes against Iranian proxies in Yemen focuses U.S. strategy and signals a return to the "maximum pressure" campaign he employed against Iran in his first term. But an approach that rests on just one foreign policy tool—military action—will not allow the United States to capitalize on Iran's weakness.

Instead, Trump should combine tough measures with creative diplomacy that goes beyond phoning heads of state and seeking high-visibility deals. The United States, Israel, and many Arab states now have a common goal to free the Middle East of Iran's influence—a rare consensus. Washington needs to convene these stakeholders to devise a realistic

blueprint for Gaza's governance, security, and reconstruction. It must clearly articulate what long-term investments it will make in the Middle East's security. And rather than freezing aid, it must lay out a clear strategy for stabilizing the region and responding to the needs of its people that makes more, not fewer, resources available to counteract the criminal syndicates that have sustained Iran's influence for so long.

Without such a strategy, the Middle East will not be able to consolidate Israel's impressive military gains against Iran. Tehran's leaders are already moving to recoup their lost power: some analyses have suggested, for instance, that the Islamic Republic helped foment the sectarian violence that erupted in Syria in March. Although Tehran issued a blanket denial, it benefits from a weakened government in Damascus. A real chance has emerged to set the Middle East on a different path. But if the United States wastes its opportunity to lead, that chance may not come again for generations.

KNOCKOUT PUNCH

In the space of a year and a half, Israel brought many of Iran's allies to their knees. Key Iranian-backed actors in the Middle East have lost their capacity to sustain serious counterinsurgency campaigns and dominate even weak Middle Eastern governments. By August 2024, the Israel Defense Forces announced that it had "dismantled" 22 of Hamas's 24 battalions, killed over half its military commanders, and eliminated more than 17,000 rank-and-file fighters. The IDF has neutralized much of Hamas's tunnel infrastructure in Gaza and the facilities the terror group used to manufacture drones, rockets, and other munitions. Hamas's willingness to agree to a phased cease-fire in January reflects its deterioration: its leaders know that the group's survival is contingent on bringing Israel's military operations to an end.

Meanwhile, the leadership corps of Hezbollah—Iran's partner in Lebanon—has been decimated. Israeli airstrikes have destroyed over 70 percent of the group's strategic long-range missiles, antiaircraft missiles, antiship missiles, and short-range rocket launchers. In an acknowledgment of Hezbollah's enfeeblement, Tehran directed the group's surviving leaders to agree to a cease-fire in November on terms favorable to Israel. Hezbollah was forced to de-link its own campaign against Israel from the war in Gaza, a huge blow to Iran's efforts to encircle Israel in a ring of fire. And in February, Lebanon formed a new government that, for the first time in decades, sidelined Hezbollah-aligned politicians.

Iran failed to protect Assad, the only Middle Eastern head of state it could count as a strategic partner. After the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, Iran invested an estimated $30 billion to $50 billion into bolstering Assad's regime, deploying Iranian officers, directing foreign foot soldiers to Syria, and providing extensive logistical and operational support. In exchange, Assad allowed Iran to use his country to build its regional network, giving it control of warehouses and airports and permitting it to move money and materiel bound for Iranian proxies across Syrian territory and airspace. The mutually beneficial alliance between Tehran and Damascus ended abruptly in December, after an anti-Assad coalition led by the rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) carried out a lightning march on Damascus, taking the capital without meeting serious resistance.

Finally, Tehran's strategy of projecting power abroad to protect itself at home failed to deter Israel from striking its territory twice in 2024. Israel's destruction of Iran's strategic air defenses and its strikes on Iranian defense-industrial facilities left the Islamic Republic's nuclear program exposed, and badly degraded its capacity to manufacture conventional weapons. Most important, Israel's operations lowered the fear barrier about striking inside Iranian territory. In April 2024, Iran responded to Israel's killing of two senior Iranian generals in Damascus with a missile and drone assault on Israeli territory. But a coordinated multilateral defense, led by the United States and comprising Israeli, Arab, and European military capacities, intercepted nearly all of Iran's cruise missiles and drones before they even reached Israeli airspace. Then, last October, Israel, with U.S. help, effectively defended itself against a more concerted Iranian barrage of over 180 ballistic missiles. These events demonstrated that conventional attacks by Iran can be defeated and that neighboring countries can be persuaded to join a coordinated defense against Iranian aggression.

READY STEADY

Israel has significantly degraded Iran's power through combat operations. But the phase of war that follows combat operations, which U.S. military doctrine calls "stabilization," is just as important. To prevent further cycles of violence and to deny malign actors a chance to capitalize on postconflict confusion, stabilization involves reestablishing basic security that populations can trust, delivering vital services such as electricity and sanitation, halting postwar economic deterioration, and helping new governments reconstruct their societies. This phase of war—an inherently

political one—cannot be waged by uniformed troops alone: they must be joined by diplomats, postconflict technical experts, local leaders, and civil society actors, even if some kinetic action continues.

The Middle East is ready for strategic stabilization. Already, new leaders in Beirut and Damascus are working to wrest their countries from Iran's influence over their security and politics. In a direct challenge to Hezbollah, Lebanon's recently inaugurated president, the former army chief Joseph Aoun, has publicly called for the disarmament of all armed groups that operate outside the authority of the state. He has given the Lebanese military a mandate to deploy to the country's south and complete Hezbollah's disarmament. The United Nations has been calling for such a disarmament since 2006. But only now, given Hezbollah's operational degradation, Beirut's new political will, and direct U.S. military oversight, does it have a chance of being accomplished.

> A real chance has emerged to set the Middle East on a different path.

In Syria, HTS's leader, Ahmed al-Shara, is confronting illicit Iranian-affiliated arms- and drug-trade networks on the Lebanese border and has boldly accused Iran of fueling instability across the region. His interim government has convened a national dialogue to chart Syria's future, inked integration agreements with other armed groups, and acted on U.S.-provided intelligence to foil plots by the Islamic State terrorist organization (also known as ISIS). Although U.S. officials worry about HTS's past links to al-Qaeda, these early efforts by Shara reflect an inclination toward political inclusivity and security cooperation that, if cultivated, can constitute a bulwark against Iranian interference, which feeds on sectarian fissures and economic misery. The Lebanese and Syrian populations, recognizing that Iran's chokehold has loosened, are starting to look to their governments rather than nonstate groups for help rebuilding their lives.

But without foreign assistance and engagement—and in the absence of any vision for inclusive political, economic, and social stabilization—suffering communities throughout the Middle East will be forced to rely on networks operating outside the apparatus of the state, including illicit ones, for their daily survival. This, in turn, will weaken their governments. Iranian leaders have noticed the new wave of nationalist leaders disinclined to take their direction, and they know that many ordinary people long to be liberated from the axis's thuggery. But Iran

fully intends to restore its regional influence: in a December speech disclosing Tehran's plans to recruit new insurgents in Syria, the regime's top-ranked general, Behrouz Esbati, declared that his country would succeed in gradually reactivating the deep "social layers" of influence that it developed while Assad held power.

Assad's removal presents a generational opportunity to set Syria on a stable path, one in which it no longer serves as a base for Iran to project power. But no matter how much Shara wants to unwind a decade of Iranian influence, he cannot do it if he does not secure relief from U.S.-led sanctions. And without significant outside support conditioned on achieving realistic governance benchmarks, he cannot curb Syria's humanitarian and economic crisis—instability that serves Iran's interests.

Iran still has substantial footholds elsewhere, as well. Despite its degraded state, Hamas has given no indication that it has accepted defeat, and its leaders are not negotiating a future in which they relinquish governance of Gaza. Hamas currently benefits from resource scarcity, diverting humanitarian aid and exerting control over its distribution. It is asserting itself in Gaza's governance vacuum, taking credit for a 2024 polio vaccination effort implemented by the UN with support from Israel and the United States. It is working with criminal networks to extort civilians and orchestrating elaborate hostage-release ceremonies to show off its persistent strength. Since October 7, the group is estimated to have recruited more than 10,000 new members, and its financiers know how to evade gaps in the U.S.-led sanctions regime, managing a global investment portfolio worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Israel's leaders have resisted articulating any vision for non-Hamas Palestinian governance in Gaza, and the proposal that Arab states developed at a March summit in Cairo did not demand that Hamas disband.

Israel's strikes on Hezbollah have left the group profoundly weakened. But Beirut's new leaders have themselves inherited a weak, hollowed-out state. To fully dismantle Hezbollah, they need help. Shortly after Aoun's inauguration in January, however, the Trump administration froze tens of millions of dollars in security assistance to the Lebanese armed forces. Even before October 7, the United States (and many other international actors) did not provide support to Lebanon other than direct, local-level humanitarian aid, given Hezbollah's capture of state institutions. Yet despite the sweeping change that has arrived in Beirut, Washington has not adjusted its approach to assistance. Hezbollah's new leader, Naim Qassem, has already indicated that he expects Beirut's reform efforts to

fail and rejected Aoun's call to disarm. If the Lebanese government cannot quickly deliver economic relief and reconstruction assistance, Hezbollah may once again hijack the state by winning legislative seats in next year's parliamentary elections. It is already working to rearm and refinance and to shore up its popular support, offering thousands of dollars in compensation to Lebanese people whose homes were destroyed during Israel's campaign.

LONE COWBOY

To restore its power, Iran will also work to further institutionalize its influence in Iraq and Yemen. Politics in both Baghdad and Sanaa are still heavily influenced by Tehran, and Iranian-affiliated armed nonstate groups are using both countries to project power. As Hezbollah's clout ebbed, the Yemen-based Houthis stepped in as Iran's new insurance policy, tying their provocations to Israel's campaign in Gaza. Since October 7, they have improved their tactics and missile capabilities and developed a savvy public relations presence. They continue to rule Sanaa, printing money, collecting taxes, diverting humanitarian aid for their own purposes, and even securing $500 million from Saudi Arabia in December for budgetary support. Neither U.S.-led multilateral strikes on Houthi military targets nor Israeli attacks on port and energy infrastructure halted the Houthis' assaults on maritime traffic in the Red Sea until the January cease-fire in Gaza was implemented. And the attacks decisively failed to create an opening for new Yemeni leadership or to cut off the weapons, training, and technical support Iran is funneling to Yemen.

Trump has reinstated the designation of the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization, which his predecessor had lifted in 2021. This will not hurt Houthi leaders, who neither travel abroad nor maintain international bank accounts. It will, however, further weaken the devastated Yemeni economy and harm civilians already suffering from the effects of over a decade of civil war, creating opportunities for Iran to expand its power. In Iraq, U.S. and Israeli efforts to blunt Iran's influence have been limited by Iraq's role in hosting U.S. forces to fight ISIS. Anticipating U.S. and Israeli pressure, Iranian-backed militia groups are institutionalizing their interests in Baghdad, entrenching themselves in Iraq's political system and co-opting state institutions to ensure the survival of Iran's threat network. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani has adopted some policies disadvantageous to Tehran, including blocking Iranian-backed fighters from traveling to Syria and expressing a willingness to keep hosting U.S. troops. But Washington has made no attempt

to reward these efforts, instead freezing assistance to communities terrorized by ISIS and suspending programs that supported Iraq's economic development. In March, the Trump administration also ended a sanctions waiver that had allowed Iraq to purchase electricity from Iran, a decision that will stress Iraq's already fragile electric grid ahead of the hot summer months and make Sudani more vulnerable.

Most U.S. officials operate from the new conviction that because the Iranian regime is at peak vulnerability, now is the time to take an even harder line. Soon after Trump took office in January, he issued an executive order reinstating his "maximum pressure" campaign to end the regime's nuclear threat, "curtail its ballistic missile program, and stop its support for terror groups." He announced several new rounds of U.S. sanctions, including packages targeting Tehran's drone program, its oil exports, and transnational criminal networks that amplify the reach of Iranian-sponsored terrorism. His administration also borrowed a page from the Israeli playbook to weaken Iran's power projection by initiating a military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen, expanding the purview of previous, more limited U.S. strikes to target personnel, military infrastructure, and government buildings.

Tehran's leaders are already moving to recoup their lost power.

Sanctions and military strikes can be components of a successful strategy, but at this moment of opportunity, they cannot stand on their own. The United States needs a policy of multilateral engagement to present an affirmative vision for a Middle East free from Iran's damaging influence. Washington's lack of engagement is starkest in Syria, where Shara's government is repeatedly and publicly expressing its wish to counter Iranian influence, fight transnational terrorism, and maintain a peaceful border with Israel. Recognizing the opportunity, Jordanian, Qatari, Saudi, and Turkish heads of state, as well as high-level European delegations, have already met with Damascus's new leaders. But the United States remains mostly on the diplomatic sidelines. Some concern is reasonable; Shara is still untested. But he needs much more determined international support so that his rule is not challenged by spoilers. And he must be given a realistic set of performance benchmarks to motivate continued efforts to stabilize the country and relief from U.S. sanctions so a legitimate economy can reestablish itself.

Where the Trump administration is engaging, its unilateral and reactive approach risks undermining sustainable outcomes. Its chaotic

improvisation on Gaza—veering from offers to "take ownership" of the territory while somehow relocating millions of civilian residents to initiating direct negotiations with Hamas—is a sharp break from the past year and a half of U.S. diplomacy, when U.S. officials prioritized creating a sustainable outcome for Gaza that reinforced Israel's security, met the needs of Palestinian civilians, and consulted Israel's Arab neighbors. That approach eventually yielded a multiweek cease-fire that allowed Israeli hostages to return and humanitarian aid to reach Gazans. The current approach, by contrast, is likely to yield policy paralysis amid a flurry of uncoordinated and unrealistic proposals, which will create fertile terrain for Hamas and Iran to reorganize.

OWN GOAL

When dealing with Iran itself, Trump declined to build international support before contacting Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to open negotiations. In dismissing the need to consult with regional allies and partners, he is repeating a mistake Washington made when it arranged the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement: back then, a lack of consultation with Israel and the Arab capitals created significant tension and left the deal with fewer advocates when Trump moved to withdraw from it in 2019. Washington's current Iran strategy appears oriented around the belief that a pressure strategy coordinated only with Israel can compel the regime in Tehran to end activities it deems necessary for its survival. But the United States cannot collapse Iran's economy or even execute military strikes without wider support. It needs cooperation from China, the largest importer of Iranian oil, and from the Middle Eastern nations that host U.S. bases and forces. It needs the support of European capitals at the UN Security Council. And without a much broader international alignment on the most effective way to isolate Tehran, the regime will leverage its relationships with Beijing and Moscow to resist any U.S. efforts to extract meaningful concessions.

Washington needs to articulate exactly how it will provide sanctions relief to actors who stop sanctionable activities. Reconsidering sanctions on post-Assad Syria is most pressing, but the U.S. government should also formulate a path for meaningful economic relief for Iran itself—if Tehran takes the necessary steps to curtail its nuclear program and its efforts to destabilize other countries.

The United States must put resources and civilian expertise behind its regional strategy even as it encourages others to share the burden.

Assistance and technical expertise provided by civilians is a core element of stabilization operations. The United States invested decades and hundreds of millions of dollars to build bureaucratic structures, corps of practitioners, and expertise in establishing the kinds of pooled funding initiatives and smart assistance programs that allow countries to successfully transition out of conflict. These tools and skills will be crucial to consolidating gains against Iran: communities ravaged by violence want to rebuild, but their new leaders lack the necessary governance, technocratic, and economic expertise to address the unique challenges postconflict societies face. The Middle East's regular militaries are ill prepared to demobilize and reintegrate Iranian-backed groups.

But the United States' wealth of experience in stabilization is now being squandered as Washington systematically defunds and dismantles its aid-focused workforce. The U.S. Agency for International Development—which Trump seems determined to raze—housed the Office of Transition Initiatives, a body designed to bridge gaps in development and humanitarian aid. The State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations—which is funded by the aid budget Trump is attempting to freeze—specializes in helping countries recover from damage done by armed nonstate actors and employs dedicated "stabilization advisers" ready to deploy to conflict zones.

The Trump administration plans to drastically reduce the State Department's diplomatic corps at precisely the moment when diplomats should be taking on more responsibilities in the wake of the momentous military developments of 2024. It has frozen stabilization assistance to Iraq, Syria, and Yemen precisely when such help could do the most good. It temporarily halted military assistance to the Lebanese armed forces just as Lebanon's government committed to disarming Hezbollah. And it suspended security funding to the Palestinian Authority's security forces, who have maintained their security cooperation with Israel in the West Bank to challenge Hamas's power there. If the United States hopes to fully disassemble Iran's regional network of influence, it must offer nonmilitary assistance while pressing others to share the burden. If it does not broaden its strategy, it will abandon the best tools it has to support the emergence of alternative players.

Finally, the United States needs to provide its regional partners clearer assurances about its own security commitments even as it asks its partners to continue the kind of multilateral security cooperation that proved so successful against Iran's ballistic missile attacks. The United

States significantly increased its military posture in the Middle East after October 7. That backbone of intelligence support, weaponry, and active participation in Israel's defense helped Israel focus on targeting Iran's threat network, dramatically altering the strategic landscape in the region. This foundation of military support will need to remain in place as the region turns its focus toward stabilization.

To maximize pressure on the Houthis, the United States should design a concrete assistance package that it is prepared to offer the Yemeni people should the Houthis relinquish control. It should actively involve partners in its military campaign to restore freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and make clear that it is ready to support countries also threatened by Houthi aggression, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. A pledge to maintain an elevated military posture for the medium term would also signal the United States' resolve to Tehran and reassure other regional leaders on the frontlines in the fight against Iran. In Iraq and Syria, Washington should, for now, maintain troops on the ground and ensure it is signaling its support for the citizens of both countries. In Lebanon, it will need to sustain the active oversight role the U.S. military has been playing in the effort to disarm Hezbollah and offer Beirut's new leaders direct support if they take more steps toward reform.

Maintaining a military presence is an investment the United States must make as the Middle East transitions, new leaders shore up popular support, and new security arrangements emerge. It must also ease sanctions as Syria's new leaders meet good-governance objectives, surge aid and technical assistance to vulnerable communities, and step up to convene local and international partners to delineate a concrete, realistic vision for a regional order free from Iranian domination. Tehran's past efforts to destabilize the region's governments, subjugate its people, challenge U.S. interests, and spread terror abroad only succeeded because they targeted undergoverned, corrupt, and politically weak states. The central objective of a stabilization strategy must be to support the emergence of more responsive, transparent governments that retain their monopoly on the use of force, their capacity to deliver prosperity to their people, and their willingness to confront Iranian influence. Contrary to decades of conventional thinking, it turned out that an exceptional military campaign could significantly degrade Iran's regional standing. Now, the United States must do its part to lead a similarly extraordinary civilian effort to make that change permanent.

REVIEW ESSAY

Why They Fight

What's at Stake in the Blame Game Over Ukraine

M. E. SAROTTE

Hubris: The American Origins of Russia's War Against Ukraine
BY JONATHAN HASLAM. Belknap Press, 2025, 368 pp.

"You should have never started it." As cameras rolled during an explosive press conference in the Oval Office in February, U.S. President Donald Trump used these words to blame Volodymyr Zelensky, the Ukrainian president, for Russia's full-scale invasion of his country in 2022. The two leaders were meant to sign a deal that day providing the United States with critical minerals from Ukraine, but that plan fell apart, and the U.S. president threw his Ukrainian counterpart out of the White House.

Trump also suspended U.S. military aid to and ceased sharing intelligence with Kyiv. Both were eventually restored, but the temporary freeze cost Ukrainian lives. As the war in Ukraine extends into its fourth year, this ugly Oval Office scene and its aftermath provided proof—if any were needed—that the war over war guilt rages on as well, with real-world consequences.

Trump is not alone in his belief that the guilt lies far from Russia. The British historian Jonathan Haslam agrees in that regard. But unlike Trump, he does not assign blame to Ukraine. Haslam makes clear whom he sees as the guilty party in his new book, *Hubris: The American Origins of Russia's War Against Ukraine*: "The fault here lies with the United States."

According to *Hubris*, Washington moved "bag and baggage into the Soviet sphere of influence and, indeed, onto former Soviet soil" after the end of the Cold War, and "those Americans who were engaged in this enterprise knew exactly what they were doing"—namely, antagonizing Russia. Haslam argues that Russia responded as it did because it wanted to prevent possible

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NATO expansion into Ukraine. *Hubris* emphasizes that Vladimir Putin, who became acting president of Russia on December 31, 1999, nonetheless waited "more than a decade, until 2014, to seize Crimea," among other reasons to prevent NATO from docking ships in its main port, Sevastopol.

Of course, Haslam is hardly the first to accuse Washington of driving Moscow to violence. Several authors did so in the wake of the Crimean annexation in 2014. In a widely cited *Foreign Affairs* essay published that year, titled "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," the political scientist John Mearsheimer stated that "the taproot of the trouble is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West."

Hubris tries to bring a new level of detail to that basic argument—but fails to make its case convincingly. The book instead reveals just how far this crucial debate has moved away from the realm of evidence. It also unintentionally sheds light on Trump's views, which, despite the seeming contradictions, have much in common with Haslam's. Both men's interpretations, as well as Putin's, pick and choose their way through a complex, messy history in search of alternate culprits.

Assigning guilt is more than an academic exercise. Perceptions of past wrongdoing will affect the future, not least because Putin has made clear that any peace deal in Ukraine needs to address what he sees as the original cause of the war: NATO enlargement. And if Trump views Ukraine as the aggressor and Russia as the victim, he may concede a great deal to Moscow. He could conclude a peace settlement that not only lacks safeguards against the resumption of Russian aggression but also diminishes NATO's ability to defend its European members. Such dangerous dealmaking comes 80 years after World War II ended with the defeat of Nazi Germany and the Red Army in the streets of Berlin, bringing Russian power into the heart of Europe. An unenforceable peace deal, resting on erroneous assumptions about history, could set the stage for a potential return of Moscow's might. With so much at stake, it's crucial to get this history right.

SMOKING GUNS?

As ever, the devil is in the details—and the unreliability of its details is a key way in which *Hubris* falls short. The book's central assertion is that NATO enlargement after the Cold War did not just threaten Russia but also violated Western pledges against such a step. In Haslam's telling, it is a "fact" that "the Russians were promised authoritatively that NATO would not expand to the East," not least during 1990 talks on reunifying Germany after the Berlin Wall's collapse.

On its face, Haslam's account has some merit. Western leaders did have to bargain with Moscow to proceed with German reunification, thanks to the way that World War II had ended. Nazi Germany had surrendered unconditionally, meaning there were no limits to or expiration dates on the rights of France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States as occupying powers. Some updates were made later to allow the creation of two German states, but an

unavoidable obstacle remained in 1990. For divided Germany to unify, it would have to persuade all four powers to surrender their 1945 victors' rights. Western leaders were willing to part with those rights—some, particularly British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, more grudgingly than others—so the challenge was to persuade the Soviets.

The West would need to offer something in exchange, and in February 1990, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker visited Moscow to find out what that might be. According to Baker's personal written summary, he put out a feeler in the form of a hypothetical question to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev: "Would you prefer to see a unified Germany outside of NATO, independent and with no US forces or would you prefer a unified Germany to be tied to NATO, with assurances that NATO's jurisdiction would not shift one inch eastward from its present position?"

Haslam categorizes not just these but also similar remarks by other Western leaders as nonenlargement pledges that were later betrayed. As proof, he cites the publication in Russia of "an embarrassingly long laundry list of the empty assurances given at various times" by those leaders. *Hubris* brandishes examples from both this list, released in 2022 by a Russian entity called the Civil Society Development Foundation, and other recent publications as a prosecutor might use a smoking gun: to provide irrefutable proof of the West's guilt.

It's on closer inspection that the cracks in Haslam's case become fully apparent. To take just one of many problematic examples throughout the book: relying on this list or a later scholarly article or both (the citations are unclear), *Hubris* maintains that "on 2 February 1990 German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher outlined German plans for reunification to Gorbachev, letting him know that 'NATO would not extend its territorial coverage to the area of the GDR [East Germany] nor anywhere else in Eastern Europe.'" Genscher did indeed speak these words on that day—but in Washington and to Baker, not to Gorbachev.

Both archival records and Genscher's memoirs provide detailed accounts of the day's events, sometimes down to the minute. The German foreign minister flew to the United States on February 2 and returned to Europe the same night in a hurried effort to convince Baker of the need for a nonexpansion pledge to secure German unification. For Genscher, that day had begun in Nuremberg with a working breakfast, a signing ceremony for an accord on cultural institutions, and a press conference, followed by a meeting in Bonn—all before his 1:30 PM departure for Washington. According to the archived American summary of the West German minister's hurried visit with Baker, "Genscher reiterated the need to assure the Soviets that NATO would not extend its territorial coverage to the area of the GDR nor anywhere else in Eastern Europe for that matter."

The chances that Genscher repeated the same words to Gorbachev that day are small and there's no proof in Haslam's citations. Communications in transit were difficult and potentially insecure. Even if Genscher managed to talk to the Soviet leader during those hectic hours, he could not have spoken with authority. Western policy remained under debate—hence the

need for the hasty trip to Washington to convey what the Soviets might demand in exchange for allowing Germany to unify—and Genscher was not making the final decision.

The sources Haslam uses to claim otherwise are also unconvincing because not all sources are created equal. Atop the hierarchy of historical evidence are sources produced at the place and time of crucial events—such as the U.S. and West German records of Genscher's February 2 visit—and held securely afterward, usually in an archive, with minimal or no chance of modification. These records are more reliable than ones produced and published later—especially by entities remote from the action, as with the 2022 Russian list of quotations—because of the risk of alteration. When taking on a controversy with life-and-death implications, recognizing this hierarchy of evidence is essential—as is the need for ensuring factual accuracy. Instead, *Hubris* contains numerous errors concerning chronology, geography, and election details and even misidentifies NATO's founding members.

SINS OF OMISSION

Hubris also ignores existing scholarship—the most glaring omission being the lack of citations to Mearsheimer—and relevant evidence that calls its argument into question. Haslam does not, for example, inform his readers that Baker, shortly after posing the hypothetical idea of NATO nonenlargement in his February 1990 conversation with Gorbachev, walked the idea back.

At the end of that month, the U.S. secretary of state informed Genscher in writing that discussions of NATO's jurisdiction should "be avoided in the future in describing our common position on Germany's NATO relationship." The reason for this about-face was that Baker's boss, President George H. W. Bush, had decided that the best way to secure Moscow's approval of German unification was not to place limits on NATO. Instead, Bush wanted the West Germans to provide credits and other forms of funding in exchange for their country's unity. As Bush put it to the West German chancellor at the time, Helmut Kohl, "You've got deep pockets." Kohl agreed.

To the anger of the Americans and Kohl, however, Genscher continued to act as if nothing had changed—and even upped the ante by suggesting that the Warsaw Pact and NATO could both "dissipate" entirely. Some lower-level Western diplomats echoed Genscher's idea of a nonenlargement pledge, either out of ignorance that his position no longer reflected top-level policy or because the idea was useful to dangle as a carrot in negotiations. None of them were in charge, however. Kohl ultimately had to instruct Genscher in writing to cease and desist.

Hubris also neglects to tell its readers that the result of the 1990 negotiations—the treaty by which Germany's occupying powers surrendered their 1945 rights—included the opposite of a pledge to forgo NATO enlargement. Although that treaty did impose limits on NATO activity in former East German territory, it established a far more significant precedent: it allowed NATO to extend its jurisdiction into all of Germany, that is, to cross the former Cold War frontline. Moscow signed this treaty in September 1990 and subsequently

ratified it. In return, Moscow received large sums of money out of those deep West German pockets.

Hubris attempts to tie its version of this history to today's war by telling readers: "You might have thought that a book about the origins of Putin's war in Ukraine is all about *them*," meaning Russia and Ukraine, but instead, the story "is also about *us*. And *us* means the United States and its allies in Western Europe" (emphasis in the original). Washington and its allies are, according to Haslam, the parties responsible for Russia invading Ukraine, because they allegedly broke their nonenlargement pledges. But the historical evidence doesn't add up in the way he claims.

COMPLETING THE PICTURE

Hubris also subtracts a crucial element from its history. It insufficiently acknowledges the actions taken by Ukraine and other states formerly under Soviet domination. This problem is particularly apparent in the book's discussion of Putin's seizure of Crimea in 2014. Haslam asks, What occurred in the years leading up to the seizure that "brought Putin to this point"? He then answers his own question: it was "the fact that Russia's main enemy, the United States, persistently sustained and enhanced its presence in post–Cold War Europe," not least through NATO expansion.

This interpretation underestimates the will of central and eastern Europeans and, above all, Ukrainians. It is not just great powers that shape events. Rather than being subsumed by the West, Ukraine deliberately sought to break away from Moscow and establish closer ties to Western institutions. To cite just one example, on December 1, 1991, more than 90 percent of Ukrainian voters supported a referendum on independence. In every region of the country, even Crimea, an absolute majority chose to become independent from Moscow. Outside observers assessed the vote to be free and fair. International recognition of the Ukrainian state in its 1991 borders—that is, including Crimea—swiftly followed, including from Russia.

In subsequent years, actions by Moscow caused many former Warsaw Pact states and Soviet republics to grow anxious about the future. They watched Russian President Boris Yeltsin order military leaders to fire on his own parliament in October 1993—killing an estimated 145 people—and to attack Chechnya in December 1994, with the fight continuing for years afterward to prevent the region's secession from Russia.

Worried they might also be at risk, these newly independent countries pursued closer ties with NATO and the European Union. Membership was not imposed on them. They actively campaigned to join these Western organizations despite the prospect of blowback from Russia. Seeking to limit that blowback, Polish President Lech Walesa even secured a joint communiqué with Yeltsin, during an August 1993 meeting in Warsaw, stating that NATO membership for Poland "is not contrary to the interest of any state, . . . including Russia."

By de-emphasizing the will of not just Poles but also Ukrainians, *Hubris* underplays the key factor that brought Putin to the point of annexing Crimea in 2014: Ukraine's fervent hope for closer trade ties with the EU. Late the year before,

Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych had, under pressure from Putin, ended efforts to conclude an EU Association Agreement, meant to bring Kyiv into a free trade area with the bloc. But Yanukovych had grievously underestimated its popularity among Ukrainians.

Protests erupted in the streets and persisted despite frigid temperatures. On February 20, 2014, according to an investigation by the United Nations, "police started indiscriminately shooting" into a crowd. About a hundred people died over the course of what came to be known as the Revolution of Dignity. With his grip on control slipping, Yanukovych fled to Russia. Haslam argues that the Ukrainian parliament subsequently "breached" the country's constitution by voting "to remove Yanukovych from office on the illegitimate grounds that the president had deserted his post." But *Hubris* fails to address the Russian pressure that sank the association agreement, which Ukrainians later resurrected. Nor does Haslam reckon with why Ukrainians took to the streets in the depth of winter, and why some even died, in the hope of closer relations with the EU.

In short, *Hubris* assigns the primary agency in this story, and the blame, to the West and particularly to Washington. But Western institutions did not foist themselves on unwilling central and eastern Europeans or Ukrainians. Ukraine itself sought closer ties to the West and its institutions. And Moscow had long since agreed, in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act—an accord signed by 35 states across the Cold War divide—that sovereign countries had the right to choose their own alliances.

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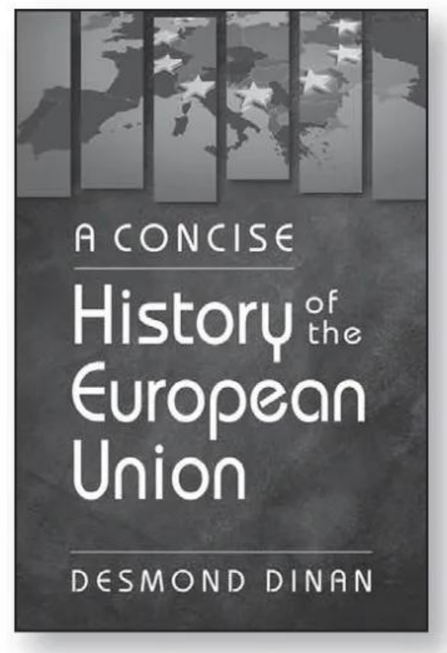

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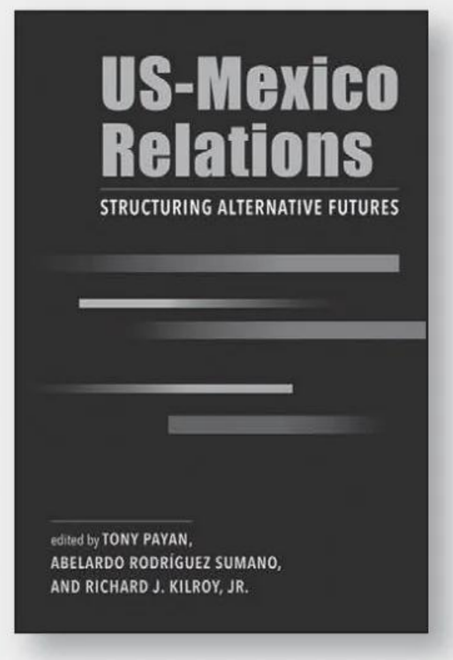
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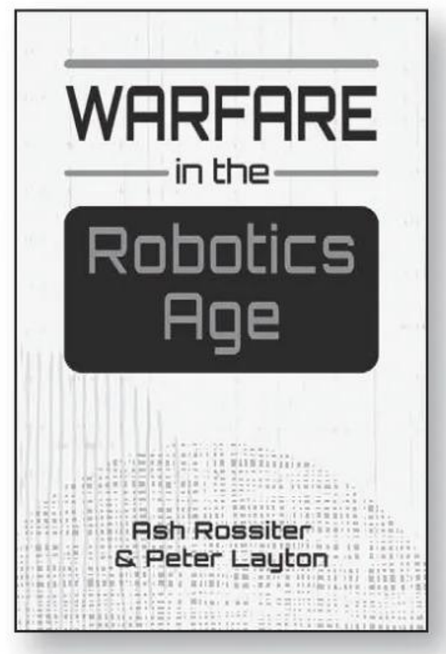

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THE PLAN ALL ALONG?

Finally, Haslam inaccurately characterizes U.S. foreign policy from the era of President George H. W. Bush to that of his son, President George W. Bush, as consisting of one coherent, consistent, long-term plan. Its "fundamental aim," Haslam writes, "was to use NATO as an instrument for the enforcement of a Pax Americana that stretched well beyond the boundaries of Europe." A central component of this plan was that, "as far back as 1994," Washington "secretly provided for Ukraine's eventual entry into NATO."

This, Haslam contends, is a crucial example of American hubris—and it's where his ideas shed light on Trump's. The two men agree that the cause of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is, ultimately, the conceit of an overreaching government that forced Moscow's hand. For Haslam, it's the U.S. government, and for Trump, it's the Ukrainian one, but both maintain that their chosen culprits should not have insisted on Ukraine's future in NATO in the face of justified Russian opposition.

Once again, bits and pieces of evidence support the notion of a long-term U.S. plan for Ukraine, but they don't add up in the way Haslam claims. In 1994, the U.S. president, Bill Clinton, and his national security adviser, Tony Lake, did speculate about the possibility of NATO membership for Ukraine. But their ideas failed to coalesce into a coherent plan before events moved in an entirely different direction at the end of 1994.

In the Budapest Memorandum, signed in December of that year by Russia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Kyiv agreed to give up Soviet nuclear weapons in its possession—including more than a thousand warheads capable of hitting the United States—in exchange for security assurances. With this outstanding security problem ostensibly solved, Ukraine (and the question of its NATO membership) abruptly decreased in significance to Washington.

The timing was tragic for Kyiv. Ukrainian denuclearization took place while the question of how to enlarge NATO was still a live debate in Washington. There were multiple possibilities under consideration. Before the Budapest Memorandum, Clinton's preferred method envisaged Ukraine and other potential NATO members joining an interim grouping that would enable them to join the alliance later. Kyiv's full membership in NATO would not have been guaranteed. But its inclusion among this group of countries on a path to potential membership would have created desirable ambiguity about its future status and enhanced Ukrainian security in the meantime.

Yet at the end of 1994, facing pressure both abroad, from countries striving to enter NATO as soon as possible, and at home, from recently elected Republican lawmakers seeking swifter enlargement, Clinton changed course. He sidelined the newly created interim grouping, abandoning the notion that it was a necessary precursor to NATO membership, and instead adopted an all-or-nothing approach. States either got in or got left with Russia on the far side of an unambiguous dividing line between NATO and non-NATO territory.

Contrary to Haslam's idea of a consistent plot to get Ukraine into NATO, Washington knowingly left a denuclearized

Ukraine outside the alliance, where it remains. Subsequent statements by NATO that Ukraine would eventually become a member, most notably in a 2008 Bucharest summit declaration, were not part of a decades-long master plan. Instead, they were belated, badly executed efforts to address Ukraine's vulnerability amid rising tensions with Russia.

THE HIGHEST STAKES

For all the messiness, this history does at least have some fixed points. There is no wishing away Moscow's signature on, and ratification of, the September 1990 treaty that allowed NATO's jurisdiction to move eastward across the Cold War–era frontline. This feature of the treaty was no accident. Top experts participated in negotiations on both the Western and the Soviet sides, and they all knew that they were crafting a historic accord with the highest possible stakes.

It was a Soviet diplomatic failure, not an amateurish oversight, that left Moscow without a legally binding prohibition against NATO expansion. Although some Western participants had discussed a blanket prohibition on the alliance's enlargement during the talks, such a prohibition did not appear in the final text. Gorbachev, who had wanted to block NATO from moving not just across unified Germany but also farther east—which he knew was a possibility—could not close that deal. Instead, his diplomats settled for limits on NATO's activities and infrastructure as it enlarged.

Imagine nonetheless that *Hubris* is right and that Moscow did manage to secure a legally binding pledge against NATO enlargement. Even in that hypothetical scenario, neither the United States nor Ukraine would be responsible for Moscow's choices on and since February 24, 2022. To name but one of many tragic examples, such a pledge would not explain—let alone make Washington or Kyiv answerable for—why Putin found it necessary to bomb a Ukrainian maternity ward.

Putin has no broken commitment to blame for his actions, but he still uses his interpretation of history as justification for his effort to subdue Ukraine. To weaponize the past in this way, he must cherry-pick the evidence. Scholars must not do the same. Haslam is undeniably correct that the history of U.S. foreign policy contains numerous displays of hubris, many of which wreaked terrible and bloody consequences. But responsibility for the horror that has unfolded in Ukraine does not rest with Washington or Kyiv. To respond to Trump's words to Zelensky: the Ukrainians didn't start it. To assign blame elsewhere is to absolve the guilty party in this war—Russia.

Any settlement resting on a false account of how and why the war began will ultimately yield an ineffective deal. If Trump and his team negotiate a peace accord on the basis of distorted history, they will fail to secure the measures necessary to prevent Putin from resuming aggression once Russian forces reconstitute. Instead, peace talks will yield a permissive environment for future attacks by Moscow, in Ukraine and beyond. Those attacks could, in turn, not only create destabilizing refugee flows westward but also threaten the West as a whole. Without an evidence-based history shaping a peace settlement, that peace may swiftly become history itself.

REVIEW ESSAY

Works in Progress

Yesterday's Economic Thinking Can't Solve Today's Economic Problems

CECILIA ELENA ROUSE

Abundance
BY EZRA KLEIN AND DEREK THOMPSON. Simon & Schuster, 2025, 304 pp.

The Measure of Progress: Counting What Really Matters
BY DIANE COYLE. Princeton University Press, 2025, 320 pp.

For Americans, these are tumultuous times. Inequality in income and wealth is at historically high levels. Climate change is accelerating, with the number of billion-dollar weather disasters in the United States rising from three in 1980 to 27 in 2024. Artificial intelligence is reshaping society at an unprecedented pace, prompting layoffs and putting entire professions at risk. According to an estimate by the Brookings Institution, up to 85 percent of current workers in the U.S. labor force could see their jobs affected by today's generative AI technology. In the future, that percentage could climb even higher.

At moments of danger and uncertainty, it is usually the task of governments to protect people and help them navigate change—to step in when markets cannot. Yet Americans seem to have little belief in Washington's capabilities. Over the past two decades, public trust in the U.S. government has plummeted by 40 percent. Some Americans believe the federal government has been absent. Others believe it has failed to meet pressing challenges, including the rising cost of living, climate change, and the potential disruptions of AI. Either way, Washington has its work cut out for it as the government tries to regain Americans' trust.

So where can it start? And what led to the distrust in the first place? Two new books—Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson's *Abundance* and Diane Coyle's *The Measure of Progress*—offer suggestions and explanations. In *Abundance*, Klein and Thompson argue that the U.S. government has been hamstrung by red

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Illustration by John Lee

tape and hollowed out in its capacity to act, making it impossible for the country to address current issues or adapt to a changing world. *The Measure of Progress*, meanwhile, takes aim at the economic data that states use. According to Coyle, analysts evaluate the economy using outdated, limited metrics, causing policymakers to misunderstand the challenges citizens face.

Abundance and *The Measure of Progress* may have separate focuses, but they are united by the notion that the government cannot address today's problems with yesterday's institutions and processes. Although Klein and Thompson's thought-provoking book does not provide concrete answers, it offers a fresh lens through which to view a struggling world and the American government's role in it. The book raises many questions, wrestles with previous assumptions, and provides new ideas. Coyle's latest work offers a more specific diagnosis of a problem and charts a direction toward better economic measures. It improves readers' understanding of progress. Both provide new ways of examining the economy and society and suggest new kinds of change.

MORE AND MORE

Klein and Thompson are two of the United States' most prominent policy journalists, and their clean prose and salient examples make difficult concepts comprehensible. An early work of a broader movement still taking shape, *Abundance* articulates a vision in which American policymakers unleash supply so that more people can access the goods and services they need and want. The authors aspire to a world in which there is clean energy to power every convenience, medical care and medicines that allow people to live longer and healthier lives, and a happy balance between work and time with friends and family. Klein and Thompson have written their book for Americans whose politics are left of center, but their assessment of government and the imperative for technological innovation would appeal to others, as well. They argue for less emphasis on policies that help people consume more of what they have today (by subsidizing demand), and their vision of abundance resembles that of some techno-optimists on the right—including Marc Andreessen, a tech entrepreneur and ally of U.S. President Donald Trump.

Klein and Thompson contend that the U.S. government today is ill equipped to deliver in key areas such as housing, climate and energy, and innovation. The crux of the issue, as they see it, is that the American state is tied up by regulations and bureaucracy, as well as a loss of government expertise due to an outsourcing of its workforce in some areas. Consider, for example, decarbonization. According to scientists, the United States will need to move away from a reliance on machines such as gasoline-powered cars that operate with their own sources of energy and toward ones that rely instead on electric grids. It will also need to power those grids with clean energy sources instead of fossil fuels. To do so, the United States must convert around one billion machines into cleaner alternatives, build new electric grids to handle increased demand, and erect more transmission lines to move power to where it is needed. The authors argue, however, that the environmental regulations, labor laws, and oversight mecha-

nisms that once created a better quality of life for Americans are now hindering these projects and impeding innovation. Decades ago, for example, California began building an electric high-speed rail system that could decrease travel times across the state and reduce the number of carbon-emitting vehicles on the roads. But for all the money California has spent, the project has led to few new tracks because environmental reviews and property protections have made it prohibitively expensive.

The problem is that although Americans want their government to do more, they do not trust it enough to give it the necessary power. This is hardly a new paradox. For decades, Americans have mistrusted government, demanded accountability from lawmakers, and expressed a low tolerance for public-sector failure. The result has been a byzantine system of procedures, regulations, and judicial rulings designed to both restrict and control state action. The 1946 Administrative Procedure Act that guides the federal bureaucracy, for example, was passed to quell fears of government overreach in the wake of the New Deal era. Similarly, during the 1970s, liberal legal advocates sued the government to force it to improve air quality, working conditions, and civil rights. Klein and Thompson argue that all this legislating and litigating has made it too hard to implement change—including the very set of changes liberal lawyers sought—by giving rise to a system that is focused on processes to ensure accountability and prevent seeming waste and fraud at the expense of results.

The system for processing unemployment insurance, which has long been in need of updating, provides a vivid illustration. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, the unemployment insurance system effectively broke under a deluge of jobless claims. California's system in particular could not handle the demand, developing a backlog with over 1.2 million claims. This occurred in no small part because the state had to follow a manual verification process built to prevent fraud. But rather than loosen rules to solve this problem, California's unemployment insurance system simply stopped taking claims for weeks so officials could process existing applications.

Klein and Thompson also argue that the need for accountability has made it harder for the government to spend on research, arguably one of the most important roles of the public sector. Analysts at the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas have estimated that around 20 percent of business productivity growth in the United States since the end of World War II is the result of government-funded research and development. But government-funded R&D has declined for the past 60 years as a share of the economy. It has done so, in part, because the system by which the government underwrites research has become bogged down in paperwork and processes designed to make bureaucrats justify their expenditures, especially to Congress. These restrictions evolved in response to spending on basic scientific research that does not have an immediately obvious commercial or practical purpose and that voters thus sometimes see as wasteful. What the public does not realize is that such research can also yield crucial breakthroughs down the line. One of the most dramatic examples is the research on messenger ribonucleic acid,

or mRNA. Early government investments in mRNA date back to 1985, at a time when it was considered an obscure molecule with no clear application. One of the key researchers behind mRNA, Katalin Kariko, famously had trouble receiving funding to study it. Yet mRNA ultimately delivered the first vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic, helping people return to their lives and the economy get back in shape.

Public mistrust also means that officials avoid funding experiments that might fail. Instead, the United States' main granting agencies for research—such as the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health—have increasingly spent on experiments that are not novel. Their grant recipients have also skewed older in age, reflecting a reluctance to fund younger, unproven scientists. This desire to play it safe reduces the likelihood of major scientific breakthroughs that could solve challenges. The Internet, GPS, and indeed computers themselves partially originated from research funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. But as Klein and Thompson note, the agency was able to contribute to these innovations in large part because it was free to take risks.

DOWN FOR THE COUNT

The Measure of Progress, unlike *Abundance*, does not attempt to establish a new economic paradigm. Instead, Coyle's book is focused on understanding the economy as it exists today. But her argument—that analysts and governments have failed to properly measure peoples' well-being—is equally essential. The metrics that economists use, Coyle insists, are inherently flawed and do not sufficiently represent the reality of economic activity and value. That poses an immense problem for policymakers and analysts, distorting their view of the world and potentially leading them to faulty conclusions and ineffective policies.

Coyle is an economics professor at the University of Oxford, and her book is at once technical and highly persuasive. (Helpfully, it has accessible summaries of its chapters.) As she explains, in most advanced countries, many metrics—such as gross domestic product—were designed in the first half of the twentieth century and therefore reflect economies that focus on physical capital rather than those heavily composed of services, with the growing digital component seen today. According to analysis conducted by the economist Zvi Griliches and updated by Coyle, manufacturing and agriculture in 1947 made up 28.1 percent and 8.8 percent of GDP, respectively, in the United States. A total of 51.3 percent of GDP was lumped into a category called "hard to measure" that included health and education services, finance, consulting, and legal services. In 2023, however, manufacturing and agriculture combined composed just 12.0 percent of GDP. Hard-to-measure activities constituted 81.5 percent of GDP when information and telecom services are included. GDP cannot properly measure these activities because it does not properly value nonphysical labor.

Coyle describes other data challenges brought about by dramatic shifts in the American economy over the past 80 years. Consider the price of goods—which is what economists generally use to measure inflation. Analysts struggle to

assign value to goods that lack a market price, and they are often slow to update the basket of goods used to measure price levels. As a result, they do not provide decision-makers with a clear image of economic health and progress. The effects of technology and digitization on labor have also created problems for productivity metrics. A quarter of U.S. productivity growth can be attributed to retail, and yet paid checkout clerks have been increasingly replaced with self-checkout machines. This means statisticians are likely overestimating true productivity growth in their tabulations, because they are counting the reduction in paid labor as savings for the company but not accounting for the new, unpaid labor by the consumer. In other words, measurements of productivity indicate that the retail business is now less labor-intensive—and thus more productive—than it actually is. Similarly, measures of GDP in the United States do not include household production, such as the care of children and the elderly by unpaid caregivers. Such care is left out even though the ratio of dependents to nondependents has grown and as increasing numbers of women have entered the labor force. When caregiving is excluded from national statistics, policymakers are more likely to underappreciate its economic value and underinvest in it.

The mismeasurement and nonmeasurement of unpaid work is a theme of Coyle's book, and rightly so. As people care for a growing cohort of elderly Americans while also learning, shopping, and posting ever more content on digital platforms, they effectively provide more and more free labor. A partial remedy for this failure is to collect better data on how people spend their time and how they use personal resources to produce economic value—such as when they provide high-quality, in-home care for a loved one or purchase a laptop and router to shop online. With more complete data, statisticians could then estimate the intrinsic value of activities through peoples' stated and revealed preferences and create a framework for measuring consumption based on how people use their time rather than on material spending. This new measurement would still be imperfect, but Coyle argues that it would allow analysts to appropriately value economic activity that typically occurs outside the traditional market—and thus make better productivity estimates.

In addition to mismeasuring labor, Coyle argues, national statistics fail to properly value natural resources. Back in the 1940s, when national measurements of wealth, growth, and productivity were created, natural resources—such as oil, minerals, water, and forests—were viewed as infinite in supply. They were therefore not incorporated into accounting frameworks, such as GDP. Analysts now know there are limits to some of these goods and that economic activity can damage the environment more broadly. But because economic metrics have not been properly updated, there is a limited understanding of what types of activities are environmentally sustainable—and indeed whether humans can maintain their modern quality of life. Put differently, governments have not placed a price on clean air and functional ecosystems.

The result is overuse and environmental degradation, such as smog, water pollution, and, of course, climate

change. Fossil fuel consumption has dramatically increased since 1950, as the world's economies have grown. In 2023, fossil fuels constituted over 80 percent of the United States' primary energy consumption. The burning of fossil fuels is responsible for around 74 percent of human-caused greenhouse gas emissions. Measurements of economic growth that accounted for the environmental costs of fossil fuels might have discouraged this enormous dependence. But the market did not and still does not account for such harms, only fossil fuel sales and use.

To accurately account for the cost of economic development on the environment, Coyle proposes the use of "natural capital accounting." This involves taking stock of natural capital, such as an ecosystem or the atmosphere, and what it produces and then estimating its value. Doing so is complex because these assets are not typically traded. Indeed, it may be impossible to accurately quantify natural capital's value to individuals and society. But Coyle argues that imperfect estimates are better than assuming a price of zero, which is assuredly wrong. In other words, rather than completely omitting difficult-to-measure aspects of the economy, analysts must at least try to create tangible estimates.

Coyle's book concludes by noting that productivity growth is not the same as progress and that societies need a better measure of advancement. She advocates for a comprehensive wealth framework that, if constructed according to her recommendation, would account for household production, determine prices for supposedly free goods, and recognize the effects of digitization on consumption, innovation, and GDP. Using such a framework, Coyle writes, would help data institutions better understand the modern economy and allow governments to make better choices.

THE LIMIT DOES EXIST

Abundance and *The Measure of Progress* highlight real challenges in adapting to societal changes and offer ambitious solutions that demand a fundamental rethinking of how government goes about its work. Yet despite their drive to understand and correct what ails the United States, both run into practical challenges.

Although it may seem esoteric, Coyle's agenda is politically difficult. Quality data is not cheap to produce. To accurately reflect the varied lives and circumstances of Americans, researchers need large sample sizes and more frequent sampling. This requires not only labor and infrastructure but also back-end support for data processing. And unfortunately, support for statistical agencies has been in decline. The real budget for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which produces labor force and consumer price estimates, has decreased rather precipitously since 2010. This decline undermines the quality of findings by, for example, forcing researchers to rely on smaller sample sizes. If funding for government data continues along this trend, the United States will not be able to maintain even the current quality of its measurement tools, let alone make the improvements that Coyle outlines.

Klein and Thompson also fail to fully reckon with the feasibility of their vision. They argue that an overreliance on outsourcing to the private sector, which can hollow out state capacity, has made it more difficult for the public sector to

tackle big problems—a hypothesis with, at best, mixed evidence in the economic literature. They also do not directly address the constraints that time might place on their agenda, even though it is perhaps the most binding constraint of all. There are only 24 hours in a day, and time is the one good that no amount of subsidy or regulatory reform can make more abundant.

Perhaps most important, despite what Klein and Thompson hope, Americans may not become more tolerant of less government oversight in the long run. Although the public is frustrated with inaction caused by restrictive regulations, many of these rules emerged from the adverse consequences of deregulation. For example, financial deregulation in the 1990s and early 2000s resulted in the financial crisis of 2008, at which point the public wanted more government intervention. The United States has gone through many cycles of regulation and deregulation, and although it may indeed be time to alleviate supply-side constraints, there will no doubt be unintended consequences that result in future restrictions if policymakers cannot strike the right balance.

Reform in Washington, of course, has always been a challenge, and if analysts limited themselves to what seemed plausible, they might never present new ideas. Since U.S. President Donald Trump took office, officials have mustered the political will to make some kinds of bureaucratic changes. The newly created Department of Government Efficiency, led by the Trump adviser Elon Musk, is attempting to lay off thousands of public employees and slash federal spending in an ostensible effort to improve the bureaucracy's functioning. But DOGE's efforts may actually increase the oversight and regulation they wish to cut, as government employees become more cautious out of fear of generating what Musk calls "waste and fraud." The public, too, could become less tolerant of state action as DOGE's drive to move fast yields haphazard mistakes. If the DOGE effort does not address the underlying forces that got the United States here, it is unlikely to result in enduring change.

A successful effort to unfetter Washington's capacity and create lasting reforms could instead come from policymakers who really know where the country is going—or as Coyle says, have the right measure for progress. Klein and Thompson give a starting point, but it will take more effort to determine the correct mix of regulation and deregulation needed to achieve "abundance" without harming the quality of life as it exists today. More broadly, the public needs a better understanding of the work of government, and it needs to adopt a more open approach to government's role in addressing important and existential challenges, be it investments in risky research, climate change, AI, or income inequality.

The United States is at an inflection point, one in which it is trying to address what many understand to be real problems while handling that which is uncertain. In this context, American leaders must rethink how government operates. They need institutions that are flexible enough to preserve progress on yesterday's issues but not constrain progress on those of today. They need to better understand what challenges they are facing. And they need to better invest in how the country responds to change.

Recent Books

Political and Legal

G. JOHN IKENBERRY

Beyond States: Powers, Peoples, and Global Order
BY ANTHONY PAGDEN. Polity, 2024, 224 pp.

Patriotism to the Earth: A Quest for Humane Global Governance
BY RICHARD A. FALK WITH SASHA MILONOVA. Rowman & Littlefield, 2025, 348 pp.

Two new books offer sweeping critiques of the modern nation-state and the Westphalian international order, each making the case for new forms of supranational cooperation to cope with escalating planetary-scale dangers. Pagden tells the grand story of the centuries-long transformation of the world of empires into a global system of sovereign states. The nation-state is widely seen as the most legitimate, successful, and just form of political order, but Pagden catalogs the often violent and coercive ways in which cultural and ethnic groups were corralled into sovereign territorial states. Empires were equally brutal, but their far-flung transnational character often provided ungoverned or locally governed areas that preserved cultural and religious diversity. Today, Pagden sees the modern nation-state caught in a deep dilemma: it may have provided the fundamental political-legal framework for securing the rights of people, but it now struggles to protect its inhabitants from the global fallout of climate change and technological transformation. To cope with these threats, Pagden is most intrigued by federal types of cooperative associations, such as the United States' "states-union" and the European Union. Pagden disavows utopian visions of world government, suggesting instead the possibility of a growing web of international laws, courts, and intergovernmental associations that bind states into cooperative global problem solving.

Falk makes an eloquent argument for an energized global movement to make the nation-state system more responsive to growing environmental threats. Over 50 years ago, Falk first sounded the alarm in his groundbreaking work, *This Endangered Planet: Prospects and Proposals for Human Survival*. In the decades since, a global environmental movement has flickered to life, but as

Falk notes, it has largely failed to build a political consensus among elites. The book identifies a host of factors that have thwarted global environmental cooperation, including the Western world's neoliberal economic ideology, failures to distribute the burdens of adaptation, dysfunctional international institutions, and weak global norms of multilateral problem solving. Like Pagden, Falk blames the failures of global cooperation on the system of the sovereign nation-state, a global structure of authority that reinforces nationalism, militarism, and power competition. Falk is not entirely pessimistic. He points to promising experiments in regional integration, international law, and networks of international institutions and civil society organizations. But in the long run, Falk argues that the planet can be saved only if people across the world reimagine what it means to be a global citizen, a new cosmopolitan consciousness that will emerge through galvanized civil society.

Dictating the Agenda: The Authoritarian Resurgence in World Politics
BY ALEXANDER COOLEY AND ALEXANDER DUKALSKIS. Oxford University Press, 2025, 312 pp.

Cooley and Dukalskis bring sharply into view a near future in which old global networks and institutions of liberal governance are captured and repurposed to make the world safe for authoritarianism. Illiberal states have long felt threatened by the liberal ideas and values that spread in the aftermath of the Cold War. The authors see an increasingly sophisticated and loosely coordinated campaign by illiberal states, including President Vladimir Putin's Russia, and far-right movements to undermine liberalism. What the book calls the "authoritarian snapback" is apparent in the growing prevalence of a global network of politicians, parties, think tanks, foundations, and transnational groups with shared pro-authoritarian agendas. The rise of illiberal leaders in countries such as Brazil, India, Israel, the Philippines, Turkey, and the United States has also created a more congenial setting for the spread of these narratives. In areas as disparate as education and international sports, authoritarian governments and their allies in media work to stigmatize liberal ideas, disparage the record of Western democracy, and offer visions of a post-liberal order led by China and others in its orbit.

World Builders: Technology and the New Geopolitics
BY BRUNO MAÇÃES. Cambridge University Press, 2025, 274 pp.

Maçães, a former Portuguese diplomat, argues that the technological revolutions of the twenty-first century are transforming the deep logic of world politics. Today's accelerating advances in foundational technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and telecommunications are creating vast new artificial territories over which major states, led by the United States and China, are increasingly locked in high-stakes competition. The "spaces of interaction" in which world politics takes place have

moved from territorial to "virtual" spaces. Looking to the future, Maçães speculates that it is within this virtual world that ultimate control of the rules and institutions of global order will be determined. The book is not altogether convincing that a single superpower could actually manage to monopolize this virtual world of communications networks, information flows, and large-scale technological systems. But the age of a geopolitics fixated on technology has certainly arrived.

The Revolution to Come: A History of an Idea from Thucydides to Lenin
BY DAN EDELSTEIN. Princeton University Press, 2025, 432 pp.

In this engrossing tour de force, Edelstein ventures across the ancient and modern eras to trace the evolution of revolution as a political idea. Ancient Greek and Roman thinkers play major roles in this account, shaping how political theorists in early modern Italy, England, France, and the American colonies would later talk about laws, institutions, and republican government. Edelstein argues that until the late eighteenth century, revolution was widely seen as a type of disruptive political change that should be avoided through the proper design of political institutions. For Edelstein, the great watershed came with the French Revolution, which gave rise to the "modernist" view that political upheaval was a vehicle for progress and human advancement. In the twentieth century, Western thinking about revolutions changed again with the coming of the Bolsheviks in Russia and the violence and oppression that ensued. Edelstein illuminates the fundamental dilemma at the heart of ancient and modern revolutions: the deep social conflicts that trigger political upheaval do not disappear in the aftermath of revolution, even as revolution sweeps aside those institutions needed to foster consensus.

Economic, Social, and Environmental

BARRY EICHENGREEN

Capitalism and Its Critics, A History: From the Industrial Revolution to AI
BY JOHN CASSIDY. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2025, 624 pp.

Capitalism and economic globalization have no shortage of critics. As Cassidy shows, their criticisms have remained strikingly consistent over the centuries. His narrative begins with attacks on the British East India Company's monopoly power in the eighteenth century and runs through the contemporary "de-growth" movement's lament about the environmentally destructive effects of economic growth. Cassidy's cast includes Adam Smith, who found fault with colonialism and the slave trade, John Maynard Keynes, who highlighted the market system's instability and lack of self-correcting mechanisms, the Hungarian scholar Karl Polanyi, who warned of the incompatibility of capitalism and democracy, and the economists Joseph Stiglitz and Dani Rodrik, who have pointed to the dangers of excessive financialization and

hyperglobalization. Some of these critics went beyond identifying flaws in the capitalist system to offering remedies. But reforms can be difficult to pull off. Fixing the capitalist system, Cassidy observes, requires not only political will but also the ability to act at the right time. This often means mobilizing a political movement in the midst of a crisis, a task that is easier said than done.

The Central Bank as Crisis Manager
BY PATRICK HONOHAN. Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2024, 166 pp.

Honohan, an academic and former governor of the Central Bank of Ireland, provides a road map for central bankers to navigate financial crises. Central banks should start by monitoring the structure and operation of financial markets to anticipate risks and recognize crises as they unfold. They should prepare various responses and plan for different scenarios, no mean task given the difficulty of predicting the form of the next crisis. They should communicate with multiple audiences, including the public, politicians, firms, and private investors, not all of whom will be receptive to the same message. Unlike the conduct of monetary policy in normal times, when standard practice is to be as transparent as possible, central bankers may want to selectively withhold information when dealing with crises to avoid further destabilizing the markets. To be an effective crisis manager, the central bank must cooperate with the government while not shying away from interventions that politicians regard as distasteful. And it must not take steps that compromise the institution's independence.

Taking Back Control? States and State Systems After Globalism
BY WOLFGANG STREECK. Verso, 2024, 416 pp.

A well-known international political economy "trilemma" holds that political democracy, autonomy in setting economic policy, and global economic integration are incompatible; countries can attain only two out of three at the same time. Streeck goes a step further, arguing that globalization undermines both democratic politics and a state's policy autonomy. Deep integration of trade and finance, enabled by markets subject to supranational rules, limits the room for democratic bargains tailored to national histories and preferences. This in turn erodes support for democratic political regimes, which are no longer capable of meeting social needs. Streeck argues for a return to the shallow integration of the post–World War II period, when trade was freer but not free, international capital flows were subject to strict regulation, and monetary control rested at the national level, not with regional authorities such as the European Central Bank. He recommends restoring policy-making autonomy at the state level, taking small European states, such as Denmark, Sweden, and Switzerland, as models. A constellation of such small states can provide global public goods, such as the reduction of carbon emissions, insofar as those states are able to mobilize collective moral energy among their publics.

Power Metal: The Race for the Resources That Will Shape the Future
BY VINCE BEISER. Riverhead Books, 2024, 272 pp.

The War Below: Lithium, Copper, and the Global Battle to Power Our Lives
BY ERNEST SCHEYDER. Atria/One Signal Publishers, 2025, 384 pp.

Two books explore the global race for important mineral resources. Many of the products and processes needed to decarbonize economies use scarce minerals, such as lithium in electric batteries and niobium and neodymium in the construction of wind turbines, as well as more familiar metals, such as aluminum and copper in cables that carry power. In his fast-paced, highly accessible book, Beiser shows how the environmental consequences of competition for these metals can be as deleterious as carbon emissions, especially when mining activities are poorly managed and regulated. Mineral extraction has damaging social consequences in developing countries, where the impoverished are often compelled to work in unsafe and unhygienic conditions. It has undesirable political consequences when resource wealth is used to finance authoritarian governments and violent rebel movements. It can have first-order geopolitical consequences, for example, since China controls a majority of the world's lithium refining capacity. It might even lead a U.S. president to talk about annexing Greenland.

Scheyder considers the same issues while focusing more narrowly on the United States. He describes how U.S. policymakers' desire for national self-sufficiency in critical materials and technologies has come into conflict with environmental activism as it threatens the sacred lands of indigenous peoples. Different federal agencies tasked with representing these interests often work at cross purposes, creating uncertainty for investors seeking to develop these resources. The tendency for successive U.S. administrations to regularly reverse the policy initiatives of their predecessors has heightened this uncertainty, frustrating efforts to develop the resources needed to strengthen American self-sufficiency and slow climate change.

Military, Scientific, and Technological

LAWRENCE D. FREEDMAN

Presidents at War: How World War II Shaped a Generation of Presidents, From Eisenhower and JFK Through Reagan and Bush
BY STEVEN M. GILLON. Dutton, 2025, 528 pp.

Gillon skillfully weaves the largely familiar stories of the seven U.S. presidents in office from 1953 to 1993 into a compelling account of how their characters, careers, and views were shaped by World War II. Dwight Eisenhower had no political ambitions as a soldier, but his fame as supreme commander in Europe propelled him

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to the presidency. After Pearl Harbor, Lyndon Johnson, then a U.S. representative from Texas, took time off from Congress and reported for duty; he was awarded a Silver Star in 1942. Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy both joined the navy, aware that fine military records would support their political aspirations; the relationship between the two men, moving from mutual respect to bitter rivalry, is one of the book's stronger story lines. As a pilot, George H. W. Bush showed genuine bravery in the Pacific. Gerald Ford had a training role in the navy and saw action in the South Pacific. (Only Ronald Reagan avoided combat altogether, opting instead to play the part of a soldier in movies.) Gillon argues that this shared wartime service helped form a common bond between these men that the current generation of political leaders lack.

Vatican Spies: From the Second World War to Pope Francis
BY YVONNICK DENOËL. Hurst, 2025, 384 pp.

An extraordinary and at times overwhelming amount of detail is packed into this enthralling history of espionage and intrigue surrounding the papacy since the start of World War II. Because of the unique position of the pope, a cleric with his own tiny state and significant global influence, the book is also a chronicle of contemporary international affairs. Denoël begins with the papacy's role in the rise and fall of Nazi Germany, including in helping Jews escape persecution and, later, in helping leading Nazis escape prosecution. During the Cold War, the church pitted itself against Soviet atheism; the Polish pope John Paul II, for instance, worked to undermine communist rule in Poland. Today, the Vatican negotiates with the Chinese leadership to protect the rights of the many Catholics in China. The book's cast of characters is immense, including spies and informers, dubious bankers, Mafiosos, terrorists, radical priests who support the poor, and conservatives who back right-wing dictators. The reader skips through murders, kidnappings, shady dealings, conspiracies, scandals—and, on occasion, some constructive diplomacy.

The Invisible Spy: Churchill's Rockefeller Center Spy Ring and America's First Secret Agent of World War II
BY THOMAS MAIER. Hanover Square Press, 2025, 480 pp.

In May 1940, almost as soon as he became prime minister of the United Kingdom, Winston Churchill was convinced that the only way to defeat Nazi Germany was to get the United States directly involved in the war. He asked a friend, the Canadian businessman William Stephenson, to mount an operation to convince Americans to join the fight and to counter pro-German and isolationist factions in the United States. Churchill and Stephenson relied on a former National Football League player and Democratic Party insider named Ernest Cuneo—the hero of this story. Cuneo's anti-Nazi oper-

ations, orchestrated from innocuous offices in New York's Rockefeller Center, helped identify German spy rings and spread British propaganda, including by disseminating fabrications about Berlin's intentions in Latin America. Maier's lively and sympathetic account features many notable characters, including FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, the future head of the CIA Allen Dulles, and the writer Ian Fleming, who would go on to dedicate one of his James Bond novels to Cuneo.

Ransom War: How Cyber Crime Became a Threat to National Security BY MAX SMEETS. Oxford University Press, 2025, 256 pp.

One of the most pernicious types of cyberattacks involves hackers gaining control of vital files and systems and then demanding a ransom from their owners. Smeets opens this revealing and disturbing book with a ransom attack by Conti, a criminal group, against Costa Rican government websites in the spring of 2022. The country's president declared it an act of war. Conti had connections to the Russian state; following Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a Ukrainian civilian gained access to Conti's files and leaked them into the public domain. In part because of the leaks, Conti then fragmented. Smeets uses this uncovered material about all aspects of the group's activities, much of it extremely technical, to support his analysis. His close examination of the internal workings of Conti reveals the group's dysfunctions and tensions among the leadership. As with other coercive activities, extracting ransoms requires establishing trust and credibility with potential targets—no easy task for a criminal organization.

By the Second Spring: Seven Lives and One Year of the War in Ukraine BY DANIELLE LEAVITT. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2025, 320 pp.

Leavitt, a Ukrainian American historian, describes the impact of Russia's full-scale invasion on seven Ukrainian civilians. Away from the frontlines, she delves into the ordeals people have suffered: having to flee, seeing homes and businesses destroyed, enduring psychological trauma, and losing loved ones. She offers an eclectic collection of portraits. A young woman becomes infatuated with a soldier she meets online. A wife and mother loses a leg in a Russian missile strike. Leavitt uses the individual stories to showcase Ukrainian resilience and resistance—themes that appear in many guises, including grassroots relief efforts. She does so with empathy, candor, and a cautious optimism for Ukraine's future.

East Asia

ELIZABETH ECONOMY

On Xi Jinping: How Xi's Marxist Nationalism is Shaping China and the World
BY KEVIN RUDD. Oxford University Press, 2024, 624 pp.

Rudd served as both prime minister and foreign minister of Australia and is now the country's ambassador to the United States. He is also, as this elegantly written book demonstrates, a preeminent scholar of China who has produced an in-depth exploration of Chinese leader Xi Jinping's worldview and the dramatic impact it has had on Chinese domestic and foreign policy. Through studying Xi's writings and speeches, Rudd has concluded that Xi is more ideological than his immediate predecessors and best understood as a "Marxist Nationalist": he believes in Marxist economic principles, a centralized Leninist state, and a strident nationalism that underpins a highly assertive foreign policy. Rudd is careful not to be overly deterministic. He rejects the notion that ideology is the sole explanatory variable for policy shifts under Xi; indeed, Xi has used ideology to justify policy changes after the fact. Although most of Rudd's analysis reflects his reading of Xi's works, he includes a particularly fascinating chapter in which he interviews UN ambassadors from various countries about their understanding of Xi's record. Their firsthand reflections only reinforce Rudd's claim that Xi has been a singularly transformative political figure.

The Troublemaker: How Jimmy Lai Became a Billionaire, Hong Kong's Greatest Dissident, and China's Most Feared Critic
BY MARK L. CLIFFORD. Free Press, 2024, 288 pp.

Clifford's biography of Jimmy Lai, Hong Kong's irrepressible billionaire democracy activist, begins where it ends: with Lai's transit to prison, shackled and surrounded by police. Yet even in prison, where Lai has been since 2020, he has turned adversity into opportunity. As Clifford describes, Lai has embraced imprisonment as a chance to nurture his mental and spiritual freedom. He reads, writes, meditates, and draws (primarily pictures of religious figures that he sometimes gives to appreciative prison guards). Lai's life, in Clifford's straightforward telling, is a series of such extraordinary transitions: from a 12-year-old boy who left mainland China with five dollars in his pocket to a billionaire clothing manufacturer who reads the libertarian economist Friedrich Hayek to a media mogul to a devout Catholic and pillar of Hong Kong's democracy movement. Clifford's portrayal of Lai is sympathetic, but he does not romanticize his subject. Lai was not successful in all his ventures, and he often comes across as difficult and demanding. But in reading about Lai's life, one finds it difficult not to feel inspired by a man of boundless generosity and fearlessness, whom even prison cannot truly contain.

The China Business Conundrum: Ensure That "Win-Win" Doesn't Mean Western Companies Lose Twice
BY KENNETH WILCOX. Wiley, 2024, 384 pp.

In 2011, after a decade as CEO of Silicon Valley Bank, Wilcox put aside his planned retirement to lead the firm's efforts to build a bank in China. This book is a fascinating blow-by-blow account of the frustrating four years he spent in Shanghai. He was repeatedly undercut and outmaneuvered by local and central government Chinese Communist Party officials, as well as by his Chinese joint-venture partner. Wilcox discovered that his partner took his proprietary investment model—which he had been required to turn over to government officials—to make independent investments and compete with Silicon Valley Bank. Wilcox concludes that China doesn't want joint ventures to succeed: it wants to learn from foreign partners and then let them fail. This book deserves a place alongside such classic business memoirs as Tim Clissold's *Mr. China* (2005) and Paul Midler's *Poorly Made in China* (2009), in which otherwise successful Western businessmen find themselves drowning in China's complex crosscurrents. Those older accounts were often funny, and hopeful that China's market and business practices would improve. That wry optimism no longer exists. Wilcox's account is less a tutorial on how to swim in China's dangerous waters than a warning not to get in at all.

Revolusi: Indonesia and the Birth of the Modern World
BY DAVID VAN REYBROUCK. Norton, 2024, 656 pp.

Van Reybrouck has produced a richly textured history of Indonesia's struggle for independence and its emergence as a sovereign state. At one level, it is an extraordinary social history of the country's formation. Drawing on an extensive array of primary sources, including almost 200 interviews, this account unfolds in tremendous detail, not only through the actions and perspectives of major political leaders but also through the eyes and experiences of ordinary people. The result is a vibrant and immersive narrative that takes in multiple perspectives. At the same time, the book places the country's modern history within the broader sweep of centuries of intellectual, economic, and military change. Indonesia's trajectory to statehood was significantly influenced by the diffusion of political and religious ideas (notably communism and political Islam), global trade, and the great wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And Indonesia, in turn, shaped the world because it became one of the founders and eventual leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement.

The Great Transformation: China's Road from Revolution to Reform
BY ODD ARNE WESTAD AND CHEN JIAN. Yale University Press, 2024, 424 pp.

Westad and Chen deliver a lively account of Chinese history from the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 through the first decades of economic reform in the 1980s and 1990s. They explore how China's elite politics, shifting social dynamics, and interactions with the rest of the world shaped a period of immense transformation. Westad and Chen enrich this familiar history with firsthand accounts that allow the story to unfold from the perspective of China's paramount leaders and other prominent individuals. They also have a flair for dramatic storytelling. In discussing the tumultuous Cultural Revolution, for example, they describe how revolutionary zealots force-fed hallucinogenic drugs to their political opponents and dug up the graves of Confucius's descendants. But amid the graphic details, the authors make a serious argument about how events in the twentieth century shaped China today. They isolate a few major developments as especially important: the ultimate failure of the leftist political radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of Deng Xiaoping as the consensus party leader after Mao Zedong's death in 1976, and, above all, the Chinese people's bottom-up push for economic reform and their determination to transform their lives for the better.

South Asia

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

Savarkar and the Making of Hindutva
BY JANAKI BAKHLE. Princeton University Press, 2024, 520 pp.

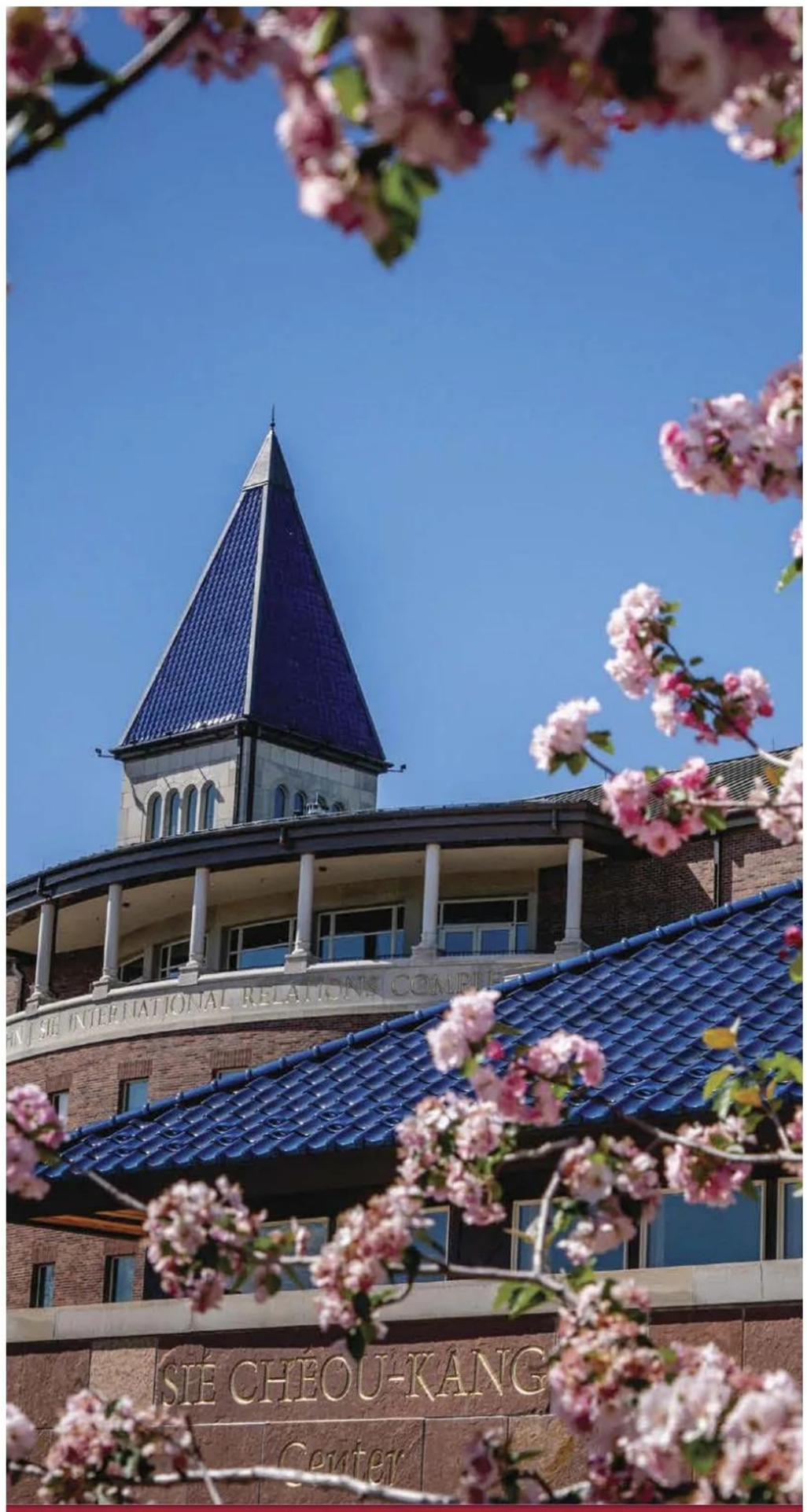
Bakhle, a historian, has produced a brilliant intellectual biography of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the early-twentieth-century architect of Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism. Hindutva is now the ruling ideology of contemporary India. Its modern ideologues, including Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, have sought to convert Hinduism from a faith into something more akin to an ethnic identity to better consolidate the political supremacy of India's Hindu majority. Central to this ideology is a deep sense of Hindu victimhood, especially at the hands of Muslims. That contrasts markedly with the ostensibly secular and pluralist vision of India espoused by the men who led the country to independence in 1947, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Born in 1883, Savarkar was a poet, historian, agitator, and reformer. He was initially part of the anticolonial movement against the British, which landed him in prison for 14 years and house arrest for another 13. After the British released him from prison in 1924, he devoted his life more to turning Hindus against Muslims than to fighting the British. He theorized how having an enemy and embracing violence would unite Hindus like nothing else would. This book is indispensable to

understanding not just the thinking of Savarkar's time but also the intellectual currents shaping modern India.

Kerala, 1956 to the Present: India's Miracle State

BY TIRTHANKAR ROY AND K. RAVI RAMAN. Cambridge University Press, 2024, 180 pp.

India's 28 states have distinct identities, development models, and political fault lines. But serious analytical work on individual Indian states has long been scarce. Roy, the preeminent economic historian of India, along with Abhirup Sarkar and Anand Swamy, has launched a series on the economic histories of Indian states. This splendid volume is the first in the series. It offers an engaging and rigorous overview of Kerala, a southwestern state with a population of roughly 35 million. Kerala has long had high literacy, life expectancy, and other indicators of human development, even though it was not one of India's most economically dynamic states. That incongruity gave rise to what scholars have called the Kerala model, made famous by the economist Amartya Sen, who argued that the state showed that greater human development was not always dependent on economic growth. Instead, it required an ideological commitment to prioritizing human development. Times have changed. Kerala's social development is no longer exceptional; much of the rest of India has caught up. More surprising is the state's economic performance. After growing slowly into the 1990s, Kerala took off.



Roy and Raman point to the effects of migration and globalization as well as the pro-business turns of the communist and center-left parties that have long dominated the state.

State of Fear: Policing a Postcolonial City
BY JOSHUA BARKER. Duke University Press, 2024, 328 pp.

States are supposed to relieve citizens of their fears by enforcing the law, but states can themselves cause fear by exercising power arbitrarily. States also seek to monopolize the means of violence, but they often have to compete or work with social groups to consolidate that monopoly. This richly textured study of policing in the Indonesian city of Bandung shows how these two dilemmas of fear and violence are evident in the process of state formation in Indonesia. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in the neighborhoods and police stations of Bandung, Barker juxtaposes two kinds of order. One is formal, defined by the law that the police claim to enforce, bureaucratic rules, and modern techniques of surveillance. The other is informal, arising from civil society, in which gangs, strongmen, vigilante groups, neighborhood watches, and political and religious organizations enforce norms, frequently through violence. These two forms of order often work at cross purposes, but they can also support each other. This fascinating study of how policing works in Indonesia and how it has transformed over time offers a grim reminder: the law does not create its own order.

Marginlands: A Journey Into India's Vanishing Landscapes
BY ARATI KUMAR-RAO. Milkweed Editions, 2025, 280 pp.

This book is a beautifully written, evocative journey through India's coastlines, rivers, glaciers, deserts, and cities. The desecration of India's natural landscapes is heartbreaking. Its legendary rivers are dying. Construction projects and subsequent landslides have marred its mountain ranges. Its glaciers are shrinking. Induced by climate change and poor urban planning, floods grow ever more frequent. Sixty-three percent of the coastline in the southwestern state of Kerala has eroded. Species, such as the famed Indus River dolphin, are disappearing. Despite that sad record, Kumar-Rao compels readers to notice the beauty, complexity, and fragility of these ecosystems. She deftly weaves poetic descriptions, pithy scientific facts, historical background, and conversations with locals to bring these vanishing landscapes alive. Tragically, well-intentioned projects sometimes have the opposite effect; walls meant to prevent coastline erosion, for example, have exacerbated it. But Kumar-Rao is not a defeatist. India's natural environment still has a fighting chance, if only more people pay attention to the local knowledge brimming in this book.

Middle East

LISA ANDERSON

Fabricating Homeland Security: Police Entanglements Across India and Palestine/Israel
BY RHYS MACHOLD. Stanford University Press, 2024, 372 pp.

This unusual book examines the idea of "homeland security" that gained prominence in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Machold argues that the idea took on a life of its own during the so-called war on terror, embodying many of the fears of that era. Governments institutionalized an array of new practices, including advanced methods of surveillance and counterterrorism techniques. But Machold insists that homeland security also became a bundle of assumptions and methods that could be exported. In the wake of terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008, India and Israel intensified their security cooperation. This was at best a halfhearted attempt, since the conditions in India were very different from those in the Palestinian territories where some of Israel's practices were perfected. But Machold offers compelling details about how India tried to adopt these technologies of governance, using Israeli trainers for its own counterterrorism units, for instance. He draws fascinating connections and parallels between India, Israel, and the United States, including how the rhetoric about homeland security in all three countries is rarely matched by actual accomplishments.

From Jihad to Politics: How Syrian Jihadis Embraced Politics
BY JEROME DREVON. Oxford University Press, 2024, 288 pp.

Completed before the spectacular collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in December 2024, this book provides a detailed portrait of the jihadi opposition force that would take over the country. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham emerged in 2017 as an offshoot of the al-Nusra Front, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization that had its own origins in the insurgency against the U.S. occupation of Iraq. HTS was also affiliated with the Islamic State, or ISIS, and al-Qaeda. During the Syrian civil war, HTS decisively severed ties with those terrorist groups, but it appeared to retain its militant jihadi orientation. Drevon argues that it evolved into a more conventionally political movement, adroitly outflanking competitors and effectively managing municipal affairs in the territory under its control. HTS formally disbanded following the establishment of a new government in Syria in January, but its leaders now run the country. As governments around the world debate whether the new regime is as moderate and pragmatic as its leaders claim, this book presents an insightful study of a shapeshifting operation.

The Incarcerated Modern: Prisons and Public Life in Iran
BY GOLNAR NIKPOUR. Stanford University Press, 2024, 352 pp.

The development of modern prisons in Iran might seem of interest only to a specialized audience, but it is in many ways the political crucible of the country. As Nikpour puts it, "Virtually all of modern Iran's well-known political and intellectual figures have counted themselves among the country's legendary political prisoners or infamous prison wardens, jurists, and torturers." Some have been both prisoners and jailers. In tracing Iran's adoption of modern theories of policing and incarceration since the nineteenth century, Nikpour also maps the political and intellectual history of the country. Prisons were built, filled with convicts, expanded, and filled again. Each regime, from the Pahlavi dynasty to the Islamic Republic, claimed to uphold human rights and castigated its predecessors as torturers, only to ratchet up the incarceration of political opponents. There are today an estimated quarter of a million prisoners in Iran. As the prison writings examined here suggest, incarceration has been the equivalent of a university education for the disenfranchised, and this excellent book is a good introduction to that curriculum.

New Authoritarian Practices in the Middle East and North Africa
EDITED BY OZGUN E. TOPAK, MEROUAN MEKOUAR, AND FRANCESCO CAVATORTA. Edinburgh University Press, 2022, 384 pp.

As political analysts struggle to find useful labels for backsliding democracies, liberalizing autocracies, and other "hybrid regimes," many social scientists are examining more closely the governmental practices that make it hard for people to hold their rulers to account. Some of these practices are well known, including censoring the press and imprisoning political dissidents, but others are novel. To exercise greater control and suppress dissent, regimes in the Middle East now spread disinformation through social media and surveil political opponents through GPS trackers. These governments may not always share the same ideological orientation, but they all want to suppress popular expression. The list of abuses is long: trolling political opponents in Saudi Arabia, posting "revenge porn" discrediting regime critics in Morocco, carrying out targeted killings in Iraq, making arbitrary arrests in Tunisia, and much more. This instructive volume does not make for pleasant reading, but it does convey the complexity of navigating a world of determined tyrants.

Mobility Economies in Europe's Borderlands: Migrants' Journeys Through Libya and the Mediterranean
BY MARTHE ACHTNICH. Cambridge University Press, 2023, 212 pp.

In recent years, tens of thousands of Somalis, Nigerians, Cameroonians, Eritreans, and other Africans have hazarded long treks across the Sahara, braved crumbling "safe houses" in largely lawless Libya, risked unpredictable Mediterranean Sea crossings to Italy and Malta, and endured Kafkaesque nightmares in the bureaucracies of European detention centers. This book traces these dreadful journeys. Migrants hoping for safety and stability are routinely caught in webs of existential uncertainty—they are transferred from smugglers to traffickers, militias to police, and humanitarian organizations to governments. It is not clear whether the desert or the sea is more dangerous, or whether the lawlessness—what Achtnich calls "fragmented authority"—of Libya is more confounding than the complexity of EU regulations; migrants find all these obstacles bizarre and illogical. Small wonder many of the migrants are disoriented and bewildered. As a migrant trapped in Tripoli observed, "We want freedom and they give us toothpaste." Achtnich sometimes drowns her informants' insights in academic jargon, but she also lets them speak and convey in often painful detail the quandaries they face.

The Enduring Hold of Islam in Turkey: The Revival of the Religious Orders and Rise of Erdogan
BY DAVID S. TONGE. Hurst, 2025, 384 pp.

Observers often portray Turkey's politics as a struggle between the pro-Western secularism of the founding father Kemal Ataturk and a monochromatic Sunni revivalist Islam personified by the current president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and his Justice and Development Party, or AKP. Tonge reveals the complex religious dynamics that lie behind the AKP's hold on political power and the deep, immensely varied religious commitments that survived attempts by twentieth-century reformers to separate religion and politics. The Cold War era, with its hostility to communism, favored both religious piety and commercial development. That period saw the revival of several Sufi orders that came to be associated with new social classes, including industrial magnates, newly urbanizing artisans, and shop owners. As the promise of European integration waned after the end of the Cold War, the appeal of political Islam grew, setting the stage for the rise of Erdogan and the AKP in 2002. Tonge is convincing in his conclusion that the religious orders are a permanent feature of Turkish politics and public life.

Africa

KEN OPALO

An African History of Africa: From the Dawn of Humanity to Independence
BY ZEINAB BADAWI. Mariner Books, 2025, 544 pp.

It is a common practice to divide African history into three epochs: precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial. Yet as the philosopher Olufemi Taiwo has convincingly argued, this approach is wrong on two counts. First, it compresses and misrepresents millennia of African history in the "precolonial" period and by so doing casts Africa as a land where nothing changed for vast stretches of time. Second, it places colonialism on a pedestal, thereby overstating the impact of colonization on historical processes in Africa, often at the expense of acknowledging what Africans did. Although not directly responding to Taiwo, Badawi's encyclopedic survey of African history is an important installment in the current wave of scholarship on the deep histories of African societies. Badawi is a journalist, and her writing is accessible without sliding into oversimplification. Given its vast scale and scope, the book does not pretend to offer definitive accounts of every major African polity or historical event. Instead, it brilliantly connects different parts of Africa into a common historical timeline, highlighting conflicts, trade, flows of ideas, and other interactions that knit the continent together. It will satisfy both casual readers and those seeking a gateway into deeper scholarly study of African history.

The Abiy Project: God, Power, and War in the New Ethiopia
BY TOM GARDNER. Hurst, 2024, 368 pp.

Gardner's account of the rise of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is essential reading for those interested in understanding how individual ambition and structural factors combine to mold a leader's choices. His efforts to consolidate power and push through his vision of modernizing Ethiopia's economy and politics have been hobbled by the country's legacy of ethnic politics. A child soldier at 14, then a successful commander, military officer, and politician, Abiy became prime minister in 2018. His tenure started with great acclaim; he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his efforts to resolve tensions with neighboring Eritrea. But that record has become much more checkered: internal conflicts have racked Ethiopia ever since. Drawing from a rich array of interviews and reporting, Gardner places Abiy's career in the context of political and economic development in Ethiopia since 1991 to show how his very rise to the premiership was overdetermined by history. By 2018, Ethiopia had to have an Oromo leader, a member of the country's single largest ethnic group. And Abiy happened to be the right man at the right time. In Gardner's rendering, Abiy appears as a figure wrestling with the country's fundamental problems, such as how

to resolve the tension between identity and national cohesion, how to achieve rapid economic development, and how to distribute political power.

Infrastructural Attachments: Austerity, Sovereignty, and Expertise in Kenya
BY EMMA PARK. Duke University Press, 2024, 304 pp.

Park shows what state-building on a shoestring budget looks like in this fascinating historical account of colonial and postcolonial Kenya. Resource scarcity often forces governments to delegate state-building responsibilities, such as developing infrastructure, to private actors. Both the colonial Kenyan state and its postcolonial successor afforded corporations statelike powers and responsibilities. State-building in this way also demanded greater participation and sacrifice from ordinary people than usually imagined in models of top-down state-building. The book explores state-building in conditions of austerity through the lens of road construction by the Imperial British East Africa Company and the fiscal reforms that followed the company's demise in the mid-1890s; the rise of public broadcasting as a mass medium in Kenya in the 1940s and 1950s via a subsidiary of the British telecommunications company Cable & Wireless; and the more recent success of Safaricom's M-Pesa mobile payment system. In so doing, it reveals the complexities and true costs of the expansion of state infrastructural power under conditions of resource scarcity.

The Suburban Frontier: Middle-Class Construction in Dar es Salaam
BY CLAIRE MERCER. University of California Press, 2024, 220 pp.

African countries are urbanizing fast. By 2060, about 65 percent of the continent's population will live in urban areas. These trends will present Africa's policymakers with enormous challenges, including rising demand for housing, jobs, infrastructure, and critical services such as education and health care. The growing importance of urbanization in the economics and politics of African states is reflected in the recent explosion of academic works on cities in the region. Mercer explores the formation and consolidation of Tanzania's middle class through property ownership in the city of Dar es Salaam. Although immersed in the scholarly literature on urbanization, Mercer presents an accessible narrative about the manifold challenges that middle-class Tanzanians face in acquiring property in Dar es Salaam—including precarious property rights, patchy infrastructure, and clashing architectural aesthetics. She also shows how suburbs in Dar es Salaam signify both social mobility and shifting social relations—in terms of intrahousehold divisions of labor, navigating two-income households, and markers of success with respect to neighbors. These insights travel well beyond Dar es Salaam to other rapidly expanding African cities.

Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics

MARIA LIPMAN

Soldier's Paradise: Militarism in Africa After Empire
BY SAMUEL FURY CHILDS DALY. Duke University Press, 2024, 296 pp.

The initial waves of popular support that greeted recent coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger startled some analysts. They wondered whether the militarism embodied in these new regimes constituted a distinct form of government or was merely a way for ambitious people to pursue power. In this provocative book, Daly argues that militarism in Africa has historically been about more than power grabs. Several of the region's coups, he insists, are a "calculated response to problems that existed in the moment." In Daly's account, the military figures who overthrew civilian rulers across Africa in the latter half of the twentieth century had visions of creating more disciplined societies, with some viewing militarism as an "ideological end in itself." This important insight, which applies to coups past and present, goes against the standard view of coups as simply extraconstitutional and undemocratic events. Daly makes an important contribution, and in many ways a correction, to our understanding of what has motivated African civilian and military rulers alike.

Intent to Destroy: Russia's Two-Hundred-Year Quest to Dominate Ukraine
BY EUGENE FINKEL. Basic Books, 2024, 336 pp.

Finkel, a historian and political scientist, offers a nuanced and highly readable account of the complex history of Ukraine from medieval times to the ongoing Russian invasion. For centuries, the territory that would become Ukraine had been part of an imperial Russia whose rulers viewed Ukrainians as close kin and repeatedly suppressed local pursuits of autonomy (which were rarely well organized or large in scale). A short-lived independent Ukrainian republic, which Finkel describes as "weak and divided," emerged from the collapse of the Russian Empire but, by 1921, was subsumed by Bolshevik Russia. Under Soviet rule, the Ukrainian national project suffered as Ukrainians endured Joseph Stalin's murderous collectivization and aggressive Russification. In 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine regained its status as an independent state. But today, President Vladimir Putin insists that keeping Ukraine in Russia's sphere of influence is a matter of vital national interest. When discussing the current war, Finkel shifts from impartial historian to passionate accuser, condemning Putin's aggression as an act of genocide.

Ashes of Our Fathers: Inside the Fall of Nagorno-Karabakh
BY GABRIEL GAVIN. Hurst, 2025, 280 pp.

Gavin chronicles the final chapter of the tragedy of Nagorno-Karabakh—an enclave in Azerbaijan—that culminated in 2023, when Azerbaijan seized the territory and sparked the mass exodus of roughly 100,000 Armenians. The enmity between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis predates their forced incorporation into the Soviet Union, but as the Soviet grip on power weakened in the 1980s, an ethnic and territorial feud between the two nations erupted again. Armenians, a people with a much stronger sense of ethnic identity and cohesion, seized the opportunity of crippled Soviet authority to attack Azerbaijan. By 1994, Armenian forces had wrested control of Nagorno-Karabakh and some of the adjacent Azerbaijani territories, driving out locals. Three decades later, Azerbaijan—now an oil-rich autocracy with a powerful army—struck back. In a decisive military campaign, Azerbaijan reasserted full control over Nagorno-Karabakh and drove out its Armenian inhabitants. While highlighting the vicious cycle of ethnic hatred, Gavin strives for impartiality. But he does not hide his bitterness at the incompetence and callousness of the European diplomats who were tasked with resolving the crisis in its final days.

Goodbye to Russia: A Personal Reckoning From the Ruins of War
BY SARAH RAINSFORD. Bloomsbury, 2024, 368 pp.

In 2021, Rainsford, a longtime Moscow correspondent for the BBC, was expelled from Russia, having been "labeled an enemy," she writes, "by a country I called home." Over the years, her deep affection for Russia gradually turned to revulsion as she witnessed President Vladimir Putin's regime clamp down on liberties, repress its opponents, and ultimately invade Ukraine. In the Soviet era, foreign journalists operated under strict restrictions. By the time Rainsford began covering Russia for the BBC, in 2000, foreign reporters in Putin's Russia were largely unconstrained—until the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As a result, most of the major events covered in the book—such as the government's 2001 takeover of Russia's largest privately owned media company, the 2004 terrorist attack on a school in Beslan, and the assassination of the liberal politician Boris Nemtsov in 2015—have already been extensively documented in Western media and numerous earlier books. Even so, Rainsford's writing—on the war, on the Kremlin's indomitable opponents, on the contrasts between Russia's harsh realities and the warmth of its people—is vivid and compelling.

Hotel Lux: An Intimate History of Communism's Forgotten Radicals
BY MAURICE J. CASEY. Footnote Press, 2024, 400 pp.

Casey portrays 1920s Moscow as a "revolutionary sanctuary," attracting British suffragettes, Irish revolutionaries, German communists, and others dreaming of justice and equality. Gathered in the Hotel Lux, they engaged in passionate political debates—and no less passionate romances. Through relentless research and serendipity, Casey was able to assemble an extraordinary collection of personal documents preserved by the descendants of his subjects. The book focuses on May O'Callaghan, an Irish woman who served as the head of English translation at the Communist International, the Moscow-headquartered transnational body committed to advocating world communism. She became the soul of the "family" of Western leftists—a confidant and supporter of young women, as well as the host of a cultural salon that drew Bolshevik artistic luminaries such as the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and the dramatist Vsevolod Meyerhold. Those foreigners who remained in Moscow too long ultimately shared the fate of many of their Soviet comrades, executed during Stalin's purges of the 1930s. Among those who left in time, some remained steadfast in their lifelong friendships, as did their children.

For Russia With Hitler: White Russian Émigrés and the German-Soviet War
BY OLEG BEYDA. University of Toronto Press, 2024, 392 pp.

Beyda gathered extensive material on the collaboration of Russians opposed to communism—known as "the Whites"—with Nazi Germany, drawing from dozens of archives and private collections worldwide. Defeated by the Red Army in the Russian Civil War of 1918–20, the Whites spent the next two decades in exile in Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, and beyond, yearning to liberate Russia from what they saw as the godless rule of Jews and Bolsheviks. When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, many Russians sought to join his forces, blind to the fact that he aimed not to liberate Russia but to subjugate it. The Nazi regime, in turn, regarded these Russians with suspicion and enlisted only a fraction of them, mostly as interpreters and civil engineers. The Whites refused to see their homeland as anything but a victim of communism or to admit that Red Army soldiers were defending their country against Nazi aggression. Clinging to their illusions, the Whites remained loyal to Hitler's Germany even after witnessing the atrocities the Nazis committed. Some even declined to repent after Germany was defeated.

Western Europe

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

Europe Without Borders: A History
BY ISAAC STANLEY-BECKER.
Princeton University Press, 2025, 416 pp.

The Schengen Agreement, signed in 1985, all but eliminates border controls among 29 European countries. Despite the political sensitivity and technical difficulty of regulating migration, the agreement remains Europe's most popular foreign policy. Most right-wing populist nationalists do not dare challenge it. This meticulously researched and engagingly written history of its founding and rationale—the best available—reveals the secrets of Schengen's success. The agreement was motivated primarily by the desire for greater economic efficiency and personal convenience, not by idealistic efforts to realize absolute humanist or European federal ideals. Another reason for Schengen's popularity is that the freedom of movement the agreement grants is conditional. National border controls can and often are reinstated intermittently to cope with trafficking, terrorism, epidemics, tax avoidance, and, above all, mass movements of undocumented migrants. In such a nuanced history, one wonders only why the author occasionally dilutes these much-needed lessons about the virtues of sensible compromise and pragmatic policymaking by characterizing controls on migrants from outside the EU as hypocritical and by indulging unwarranted fears about Schengen's future dissolution.

Harfleur to Hamburg: Five Centuries of English and British Violence in Europe
EDITED BY D. J. B. TRIM AND BRENDAN SIMMS. Hurst, 2024
336 pp.

For millennia, brutal acts of mass violence against enemy soldiers and civilians were commonplace. Here the editors consider 11 troubling case studies of such extreme violence by English and British governments—from the 1415 Battle of Harfleur through World War II. Motivated only by strategic self-interest, political leaders and military commanders planned the use of harsh measures against soldiers and people, carefully weighing the advantages and disadvantages. Such tactics included the extraordinary plunder and destruction of the Hundred Years' War and the fire bombings of cities in World War II. These cruel acts were directed not just against those of other races or religions in the colonized world but also against neighboring white Christian Europeans. Even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the public began to impose normative constraints on violence directed at foreign civilians, politicians and generals still conspired to obscure and circumvent these limits when necessary to pursue the national interest. This book is a troubling reminder that the stakes of war can make criminals of everyone.

Lawless Republic: The Rise of Cicero and the Decline of Rome
BY JOSIAH OSGOOD. Basic Books, 2025, 384 pp.

Reading current headlines in the United States, some may wonder what life would be like in the final days of a collapsing republic. What happens if the rule of law becomes more procedural than real, if the legislature can no longer constrain a powerful executive, if rhetoric loses any connection with reality, and if oligarchs, politicians, and special interests use money and violence to compete for primacy? This accessible scholarly book finds answers to those questions 2,000 years ago, in the last days of the Roman Republic. It views the politics of the time through the eyes of the statesman and orator Cicero, a leading supporter of the republic, who made his living as a lawyer. His greatest contribution was his brave and public-spirited effort to defend the constitutional rule of law against a series of would-be dictators: Catiline, Julius Caesar, and Mark Antony. In the end, however, he failed, witnessed the collapse of the republic, and paid with his life. His example and his rhetoric have inspired centuries of statesmen, including the Founding Fathers of the United States.

Democracy and War: Politics and Identity in a Time of Global Threats
BY NORBERT RÖTTGEN. dtv Verlagsgesellschaft, 2024, 208 pp.

The moderate-right Christian Democratic Union will likely lead Germany's new coalition government. In this book, Röttgen, a veteran German parliamentarian and one of the party's leading foreign-policy thinkers, previews what lies ahead for the new government. His longtime criticism of German wishful thinking and strong advocacy for greater support for Ukraine, firmer opposition to Russia, and robust European rearmament—all positions endorsed by both the new government and German public opinion—lend his words more authority. He issues a damning indictment of the German government's behavior during the first three years of the war in Ukraine: officials gave high-minded speeches about a historic *Zeitenwende*, or turning point, yet dragged their feet in providing concrete military aid. Röttgen offers little to placate Germany's surging far-right populists or its moderates concerned about the costs of massive rearmament. He simply calls for more resolute political leadership. The next few months will see whether the CDU government rises to that challenge.

Who Will Defend Europe? An Awakened Russia and a Sleeping Continent
BY KEIR GILES. Hurst, 2024, 280 pp.

Giles believes that Russia is a revisionist force willing to risk great-power war to realize its goal of territorial expansion, not just in Ukraine but across eastern Europe. He compares the West's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine to Europe's appeasement of Hitler in the prelude to World War II. To deter Russia, Europe must immediately increase military spending to the

levels that prevailed at the height of the Cold War. These basic claims about the intentions of Russian President Vladimir Putin are easier to make than to prove: Giles offers little evidence of Putin's Hitlerian tendencies, beyond pointing to one children's map in which land outside Russia is included in its borders and some Kremlin rhetoric about Ukraine. Moreover, it is far from obvious that rearmament at the cost of other domestic priorities would necessarily leave NATO countries more secure. Even if both premises are correct—that Putin has Hitlerian inclinations and wants to expand into eastern Europe—Western societies may struggle to mobilize the requisite political will and economic resources to contend with the threat.

Western Hemisphere

RICHARD FEINBERG

America, América: A New History of the New World
BY GREG GRANDIN. Penguin Press, 2025, 768 pp.

Grandin makes a compelling case for the intricate connections tying the United States to its southern neighbors. In bright, fluid prose, the historian argues that Latin American political thought and diplomatic ideals have mightily influenced the more powerful northern country. Doctrines elaborated on in Latin America—of international law, the juridical equality and sovereignty of states, and nonintervention in the internal affairs of other states—inspired Wilsonian liberal internationalism; President Franklin Roosevelt's restrained Good Neighbor policy, which emphasized trade and cooperation in the Western Hemisphere rather than the exercise of force; the ideals that shaped the United Nations; and even the NATO military alliance. The humane social democracies that flourished in early-twentieth-century Latin America also anticipated and later reinforced Roosevelt's New Deal. Grandin is distressed by the resurgence today of reactionary impulses in the United States. Yet he finds grounds for hope south of the United States, where "more than 480 million Latin Americans, out of a total of 625 million, live under some kind of social democratic government."

The First and Last King of Haiti: The Rise and Fall of Henry Christophe
BY MARLENE L. DAUT. Knopf, 2025, 656 pp.

The storied leaders of the Haitian Revolution that erupted in 1791 and led to the country's independence in 1804—Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henry Christophe—are giants of world history and, at the same time, tragically flawed military despots who contributed to their country's perpetual troubles. In this authoritative, elegant biography, Daut meticulously combs the torrents of contemporary letters and broadsheets to draw a complex, contradictory portrait of Christophe, also known as King Henry. Although Daut sympathizes with the Black liberators who heroically battled the savage French

imperialists to establish a post-slavery order in Haiti, she does not hesitate to chronicle the dizzying internecine conspiracies, betrayals, defections, and insurrections that contributed to the bloodletting. Both the French, who were intent on reimposing slavery, and the Haitian revolutionaries, motivated to exact vengeance and to defend their hard-fought gains, perpetrated atrocities. The surviving revolutionary leaders became fabulously wealthy from the confiscated French estates; King Henry built luxurious palaces and hosted weeklong debaucheries for his newly minted aristocracy. In the end, abandoned by his own troops yelling "Death to the tyrant!" King Henry shot himself in the chest in 1820.

Chile in Their Hearts: The Untold Story of Two Americans Who Went Missing After the Coup
BY JOHN DINGES. University of California Press, 2025, 308 pp.

Dinges has written widely on Washington's complicity in the murderous activities of South American military juntas in the 1970s. In Chile, immediately following the ruthless 1973 coup, the military executed two young Americans, Charles Horman and Frank Teruggi. The 1982 film *Missing*, directed by Costa-Gavras, brought global attention to the case and implied U.S. involvement in Horman's demise. With his unique credibility on the topic, Dinges eschews ideological presumptions for a dogged, comprehensive investigation of the facts. His courageous findings debunk the conventional wisdom reflected and amplified by *Missing*: there is no evidence that the U.S. government was involved. Just why the soldiers targeted Horman and Teruggi remains a mystery; Dinges suggests, in his sensitive portraits of the two committed partisans, that their deep involvement with left-wing politics in Chile may have put them at risk. He also notes that the U.S. embassy in Santiago failed to actively investigate the whereabouts of the two missing American citizens, perhaps bound by then National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger's directives not to criticize Washington's ally, Chilean leader General Augusto Pinochet.

The Challenge of the American Countries at the G-20
EDITED BY JORGE ARGÜELLO. Latin American Development Bank (CAF), Fundación Embajada Abierta, y UADE, 2024, 172 pp.

Experienced officials and foreign affairs experts from the five countries in the Western Hemisphere that are members of the G-20 (Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, and the United States) assess, at varying degrees of analytical depth, the forum's contributions and shortcomings. The G-20 convenes the leading developed and developing countries in a more privileged—and hopefully more functional—setting than larger, universal institutions such as the United Nations. The contributors from Canada and the United States emphasize the G-20's successes at crisis management, particularly during the global financial crisis of 2008 and in responding to the shocks resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The

authors from Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico value the G-20 as a platform to showcase their leadership credentials and to promote their demands for greater equality in multilateral forums and in global resource allocation. Some authors bemoan the excessive expansion of the G-20's agenda and its plethora of working groups that generate over 100 initiatives each year. Notwithstanding the resurgence of regionalism in international affairs, none of the contributors expect the five American countries to form a coherent Western Hemisphere lobby within the G-20.

The United States

JESSICA T. MATHEWS

Electoral Reform in the United States: Proposals for Combating Polarization and Extremism
EDITED BY LARRY DIAMOND, EDWARD B. FOLEY, AND RICHARD H. PILDES. Lynne Rienner, 2025, 347 pp.

The Primary Solution: Rescuing Our Democracy From the Fringes
BY NICK TROIANO. Simon & Schuster, 2024, 352 pp.

Two new books explore the deeply troubled election system in the United States. The editors of *Electoral Reform* present the work of a scholarly task force created in the wake of the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol by supporters of President Donald Trump. The volume's premise is that institutional defects in the electoral system give extreme candidates and factions an undue voice, producing a disproportionate number of extremist winners. These outcomes further polarize politics and lessen trust in governing institutions, so much so that Americans now express a similar level of confidence in their government as do people in autocratic, dysfunctional Venezuela. The study examines potential solutions in alternative voting methods and structures, including proportional representation for legislatures and state offices (as opposed to the single-member winner-take-all system), alternatives to partisan primaries, changes to the presidential nomination process, and campaign finance reforms. This scholarly volume presents deep, data-based analysis of various possible reforms, the tradeoffs that would be entailed, and the uncertain outcomes of adopting any new system. In the end, the authors can agree on little except to urge experimentation at the state level with nonpartisan primaries and ranked-choice voting, based on the model currently in use in Alaska.

Whereas the previous volume is geared toward specialists, Troiano addresses the general reader in a passionate, highly readable, and compelling argument, based in part on personal experience running for Congress, that, interestingly, reaches much the same conclusion. He argues that the single biggest problem among the many that afflict the American political system is partisan primaries—that is, primaries open only to voters registered with one of the two major parties. Because so many House districts are dominated by a single party, in 2022 roughly 30 million registered

voters (independents and members of the minority party) couldn't vote in the election that effectively determined who would represent them in Congress. In that year, Troiano has calculated, eight percent of voters cast ballots in the primary contests that determined 83 percent of House members. Two astoundingly simple principles would yield a dramatically improved system: all eligible voters must be able to vote in a primary regardless of party; and to prevail, a candidate must win a majority of the vote rather than a plurality. Ranked-choice voting, also known as an instant runoff, produces a majority winner. Its implementation would ensure that if one's first choice is a lesser-known candidate, one could then also vote for a better-known and more likely candidate. The vote would thereby reflect one's true beliefs while still materially influencing the outcome of an election. At least theoretically, this system would provide an incentive for candidates to build broad coalitions near the center. Studies and actual practice suggest that such a system would substantially raise turnout while also producing winners who more closely reflect the demographic and partisan identities of their constituencies.

Making Sense of Slavery: America's Long Reckoning, From the Founding Era to Today
BY SCOTT SPILLMAN. Basic Books, 2025, 448 pp.

The book is less about slavery than about how Americans have thought, written, and wrestled with it for more than 200 years. The history flows briskly through well-known episodes, such as the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857, to the little-known mid-nineteenth-century work of George Washington Williams, a Black historian whom W. E. B. Du Bois later called "the greatest historian of the race." Spillman delves into the historian Frederick Jackson Turner's hugely influential argument that the Western frontier, not slavery, was the defining element of American history—even though Turner's West was the northwest of miners, ranchers, and farmers where he grew up, not the southwest of plantations and auction blocks. Spillman highlights the contributions of the female historians Saidiya Hartman and Annette Gordon-Reed in shifting historians' focus from the words of slaveholders to those of the enslaved people themselves and the economic arguments of David Brion Davis and others that slavery was intrinsic, not peripheral or accidental to American history. This rich and often fascinating narrative concludes with a masterful account of the continuing controversy spawned by *The New York Times'* 1619 Project.

The Pardon: The Politics of Presidential Mercy
BY JEFFREY TOOBIN. Simon & Schuster, 2025, 304 pp.

The core of Toobin's tenth book is a compulsively readable, minute-by-minute account of how President Gerald Ford reached his decision in 1974 to pardon his disgraced predecessor, Richard Nixon, for the crimes uncovered during the Watergate scandal.

It describes the high-stakes negotiations to set the pardon's terms and determine the ownership of the former president's papers and secret tape recordings. Initially received with public outrage, the pardon came to be seen as a courageous, even honorable act that allowed the country to move on from Watergate. But Toobin judges the pardon to have been a "terrible" decision: what he calls a "preemptive strike against accountability." He dissects Ford's muddled thinking about the pardon and examines the decision's aftermath, tracing how Ford's successors have used and abused this unrestricted presidential power, culminating in a flood of egregious acts at the end of President Donald Trump's first term. Those pale in comparison to Trump's blanket pardon this year of more than 1,500 participants in the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, which took place shortly after Toobin's book went to press. During his 2024 campaign, Trump described these individuals first as "political prisoners," then as "hostages," and eventually began using the pronoun "we" when talking about them. "When he pardons them," Toobin presciently predicts, "Trump will, in effect, pardon himself."

FOR THE RECORD

Christopher de Bellaigue's article "What Iran Wants" (March/April 2025) incorrectly stated that Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States supplied Iraq with chemical weapons. In fact, in the 1980s, Iraq itself produced those chemical weapons, with dual-use materials and precursors supplied by companies in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

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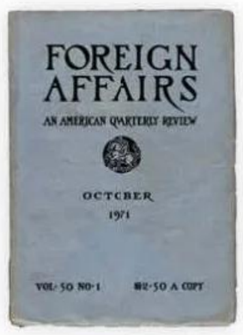
October 1971

"A New European Defense Community"

FRANÇOIS DUCHÊNE

During an earlier crisis in the transatlantic relationship, accompanied by a thaw between Moscow and Washington, François Duchêne—the director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies and an architect of European integration—made the case that Europe must develop a more independent military capability. Europeans were questioning whether they could rely on the United States as their protector. A defense community of their own, Duchêne argued, would offer insurance against both American abandonment and growing Cold War tensions.

European and American force reductions, economic rivalries and "inward-looking" attitudes in both societies could reduce each country's trust in its allies and particularly that of Europe in an America faced with a potential nuclear crisis. In such circumstances, American opinion might grow increasingly irritated with the European states while an element of appeasement could enter into the policies toward the Soviet Union. "Détente" would then connote mainly a shift in the balance of power in Europe in favor of Russia. The Soviet Union might increasingly interfere in Western policy-making, particularly on security issues, in the name of enlightened East-West relations and be sure to find a party in the West responsive to its arguments. . . .



This is the basis of a third alternative to superpower control or Soviet hegemony in Europe, the possibility of a West European entity becoming an increasingly significant element in the security balance. The West European Ten together will have total forces numbering over two million men and 300 combat vessels, respectable resources even by superpower standards. They do not mean much without a common political purpose, which is lacking, but even the potentials of power have an effect on that.

A more coördinated West European defense system could not replace the American nuclear guarantee, but it could reinforce it and make it more credible, which would be especially welcome if the totals of West European forces and of American forces in Europe both go down.

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